

A practical toolkit

THIRD SECTOR EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT AND THE CHALLENGE OF JOB QUALITY

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The ‘work-first’ model of ‘activating’ the unemployed, geared towards fast job entry, is deeply problematic and can push people into poor quality work. Job quality matters for workers’ health and wellbeing, and any job is not better than no job.

Many third-sector organisations (TSOs) offer ‘personalised’ employability support that is user-centred, with a mission to help users find sustainable routes out of poverty. However, the UK’s ‘neo-liberal’ labour market and welfare model presents major challenges in delivering decent/good/fair work for all.

You will already be grappling with these issues. This toolkit is designed to help you take forward empowering conversations around helping users to access decent sustainable work, and what more might be done (1) within your organisation, (2) with your users, and (3) with the employers you work with.

The ultimate prize is that the more TSOs can support user choices and link this to decent work, the more their users are likely to sustain transitions into the labour market, deriving well-being benefits from both the support they receive while in the programme and those that can potentially flow from employment.

What is a good job?

The terms ‘good work’, ‘fair work’ and ‘decent work’ have distinct policy lineages and uses. ‘Good jobs’ have features like:

- contractual security;
- fair pay that affords at least a real living wage;
- strong working relationships;
- promotion of health, safety and psychosocial wellbeing;
- support for employee voice and representation;
- inclusion of varied and interesting work;
- opportunities for learning, development and skills use;
- a good effort–reward balance;
- support for autonomy, control and task discretion;
- and good work–life balance¹

But a good job does not necessarily tick all these boxes. Conversely, bad jobs will typically lack these elements, but some ‘bad jobs’ will be better than others.

A further complication is that job quality has both objective and subjective dimensions. Jobs with many ‘bad job’ features may be seen as ‘satisfying’ or ‘meaningful’ by workers, even if that does not imply satisfaction with all aspects. Vulnerable users with complex employment barriers and limited employment ‘choices’ may view prospective jobs through the lens of what they regard as ‘realistic’.

Organisations providing employability support may also need to be pragmatic in terms of what is realistic, given the need to deliver job outcomes to meet funder requirements and/or because long spells of unemployment are known to corrode well-being as well as future employment prospects.

TSOs may have to balance access to employment with considerations of job quality, whilst taking into account user preferences in a context of constrained choice. Because they operate on the supply-side of the labour market in terms of preparing users for work, their ability to influence what happens inside employing organisations is limited. The latter is heavily influenced by

¹ Adapted from Marmot et al., 2020: 61

employers' decisions and the institutional-regulatory environment. Given this context, **we ask what can third-sector employability providers do to engage with the challenge of job quality for their users?**

What can you do?

For your own organisations, you will probably be thinking about which aspects of job quality matter most for individual clients and how to respect user choices, while recognising some jobs are worse than having no work at all. This may influence how you decide which employers to work with. This may involve you deciding which employers align with your values and, perhaps, how you work with some of them to improve aspects of job quality that can both help your users to access work and the employer to address recruitment challenges. This may involve challenging employers on such issues and supporting users to do so.

In our research, we found that TSOs delivering employability support can engage with job quality in three key ways: (1) through framing the issue internally, (2) through shaping the choices that users make, and (3) through shaping employer practice.

These form a **three-dimensional framework** (see Figure 1), where organisations could take what we term a more **expansive** or more **restrictive** approach on each of these dimensions, depending on many factors and the constraints under which they work (see Table 1).

Organisations which take an expansive approach will tend to give more emphasis to job quality and try to shape user choices and the opportunities engaged employers offer accordingly. This might, for example, involve discussing with users structural constraints on obtaining decent sustainable work presented by the labour market, welfare system and how employers structure jobs.

Those who take a more restrictive approach are likely to leave it down to users to decide (within the bounds of what is realistically obtainable) and focus more narrowly on getting them into work of their choice which fits their personal circumstances.

Figure 1 - Three Dimensional Toolkit to Discuss Job Quality in your Organisation

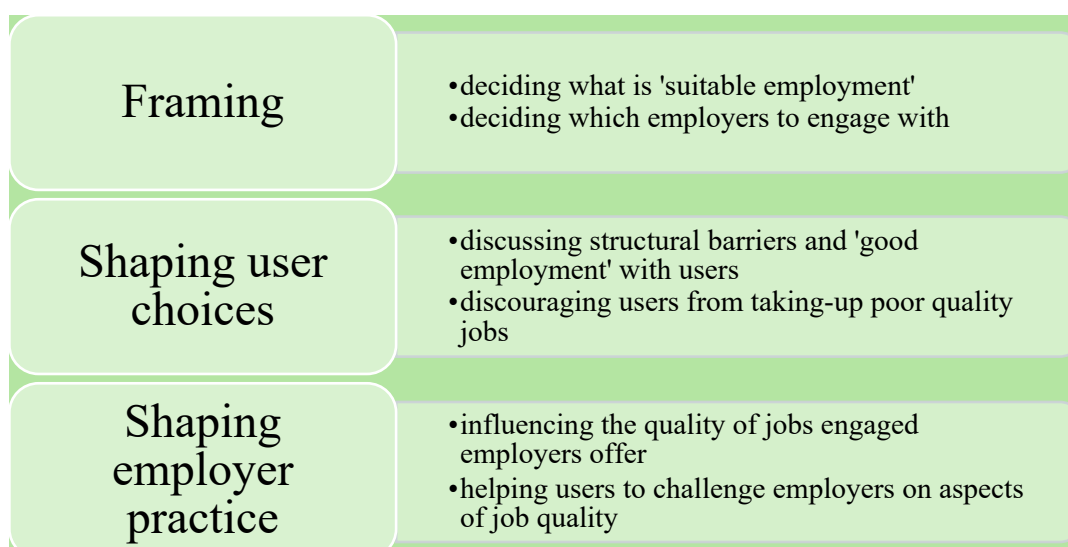


Table 1: Expansive and Restrictive Approaches

Dimension	Restrictive approach	Expansive approach
Framing suitable employment and the right employers	Little focus on job quality criteria in framing suitable employment and which employers to engage with	Greater focus on job quality in framing suitable employment and which employers to engage with
Shaping user perspectives	<p>Challenging unrealistic expectations, steering users towards 'realistic' jobs but with little reference to job quality</p> <p>Little or no attempt to discuss structural constraints with users presented by employers' practices and labour market structures</p>	<p>Challenging unrealistic expectations, steering users towards realistic jobs but also away from poor-quality employment</p> <p>Discussion with users about constraints presented by employers' practices and labour market structures to help avoid self-blame</p>
Shaping employer practices	Attempt to influence employer recruitment to open up jobs and work experience opportunities for users but little attempt to influence employers' wider job quality	Attempt to influence employer recruitment to open up jobs and work experience opportunities for users as well as influence employers' wider job quality

The toolkit is designed to help you think about your position on each of these dimensions and what more can be done to move towards the more expansive end of the spectrum. In taking forward empowering conversations with your team as part of internal development activities you might consider discussing issues like:

Framing

What are you currently doing or not doing on the 3 dimensions and where do you want to be on the expansive-restrictive continuum?

What constraints do you face in moving towards a more expansive approach?

What factors should you consider when deciding on which employers to engage with? For example, should you only work with people who pay the real living wage? Only those who offer non-zero hours contracts? Only those who offer a reasonable pathway to progression in the organisation? Etc.

What do key workers view as good/fair work? Do you deliver good/fair work for your own staff and does this affect their views of good work for users?

Shaping User Choices

Should you include users in these conversations and, if so, how might you do so as part of a 'co-production' approach?

Do you discuss structural constraints with users which impede their ability to access decent work?

Do you talk to clients about what a good job is, and how they can work towards securing good work?

Do you want to empower key workers to advise clients not to take bad jobs? And how would you support key workers to help clients make choices in response to job offers?

Is there consistency of approach across key workers? Do key workers require additional training in this respect?

What is possible given the kind of users you are supporting?

Shaping Employer Practice

What examples exist of best practice from employers with whom you currently work that you could share with other employers?

How far do you engage in conversations with employers to help them think about the benefits of improving job quality?

Might you impose conditions on employers you work with?

How might you do more to open up such conversations?

Co-producing the toolkit

As part of the piloting process, a joint DMU/ERSA half-day workshop was held in June 2025 with a select group of TSOs to discuss the practicalities of the toolkit and how it might be developed and used. The qualitative feedback we received focused on the following key points:

- ❖ The toolkit has the potential to help TSOs to empower users to think ‘in a more structured way’ about the quality of jobs. Care has to be taken that this expands rather than limits options for those with few employment choices. Some jobs may not be ‘good jobs’ but can still provide confidence, valuable experience and social connections with fellow workers.
- ❖ TSOs wanted to learn more about the elements that make up ‘good work’ as well as the constraints employers face in delivering them. They also noted that individual users may give some elements higher priority than others.
- ❖ The toolkit is likely to have greater utility for clients that are not funded through universal credit and potentially subject to benefit sanctions.
- ❖ TSOs’ influence over employer practice, whether this is inclusive hiring or adjusting aspects of the job offer to fit around the needs of their user group, is often greater where employers are experiencing recruitment and retention problems.
- ❖ Further work could focus on making the toolkit a more usable and interactive resource that can be used in both development sessions for key workers as well as in their interactions with users.

- ❖ There is the potential to use the toolkit to foster conversations involving TSOs, employers and policy makers, giving greater consideration to the structural constraints within which TSOs and users operate, and the different positionings of TSOs in terms of their size, resources, funding mechanism, distance from the work-first Jobcentre-Plus system, ethos, user group, and the local labour markets they operate in.

Future plans and contacts

We are planning to continue our work with TSOs to develop the toolkit. If you are interested in working with us or want to know more you can contact us using the information below.

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