

WHAT MAKES A LINK UP WORKER EFFECTIVE?

Link Up has been operational since January 2012 across ten of Scotland's most vulnerable communities. In this time, the programme has demonstrated that creating the right conditions for change, working with what's good in a community and using social activities to build relationships between local people, can deliver material positive change for individuals and their community. Find out more at:

<http://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/our-funds/link-up>

From the outset, the role of the local Link Up worker was recognised as being critical to the delivery of this change. Two independent evaluations, [Clarity in 2013](#) and [ODS in 2014](#), validated this view, both highlighting that the success of a project is materially dependent on the practice of the local worker.

These evaluations and our own experience have also illustrated the role of a local worker is extremely challenging; being physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually draining.

In light of these factors, Inspiring Scotland commissioned an independent consultant (Quine Time) in summer 2015, to help them achieve a deeper understanding of the personal and situational factors which help a local Link Up worker to be effective in their role.

This paper reflects Inspiring Scotland's analysis and interpretation of the findings from Quine Time's study. We believe that this paper and the publication of the full report from Quine Time¹ will be of value to organisations whose practice is rooted in assets-based working at a community level and to policy makers and strategic decision-makers seeking to stimulate greater individual and community-led change.

Approach

Quine Time's study began from the premise that all Link Up workers are effective and that they each have a range of personal 'resources and assets' which they deploy in their role. The study sought to identify what these resources and assets are and the extent to which any are common to the majority of the 15 Link Up workers who participated.

This was achieved through a positive diagnostic approach developed by the psychologist, Robert Biswas-Diener². His approach seeks to provide a holistic picture of what is going well with an individual by exploring five areas of positive human functioning (see below).

Additionally, two further aspects were added to the areas of study. Firstly, 'curiosity' was incorporated into Biswas-Diener's dimension on 'Future Orientation' as it was deemed important to achieve some understanding of a worker's propensity to stretch their capabilities. Secondly, a 'Personality' dimension was added to explore a worker's characteristic patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Each dimension was explored through a range of on-line and manual diagnostic assessment tools. The six dimensions were as follows:

- Well-being - how one is feeling in the moment and with life in general.
- Values - the beliefs and ideals which guide our decisions.
- Personality - a person's characteristic thoughts, feelings and behaviours.
- Capacities - personal strengths and accessible support.
- Situational - knowledge of optimal work conditions.

¹ Quine Time's full report can be found in the Link Up section of Inspiring Scotland's website at: [\[http://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/media/48524/Link-Up-Workers-Personal-Resources-and-Assets_Final_250216.pdf.\]](http://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/media/48524/Link-Up-Workers-Personal-Resources-and-Assets_Final_250216.pdf)

² Robert Biswas-Diener, 2010, Practicing Positive Psychology Coaching, published by John Wiley & Sons Inc

- Future Orientation - a person's level of hope and curiosity.

Additionally, the information gained from the assessments was complemented by one-to-one interviews. These helped to build a qualitative understanding of each worker's lived experience and how that may have shaped/been shaped by the diagnostic responses.

What makes a Link Up Worker Effective?

Despite the complex nature of the study undertaken by Quine Time and the small sample size, the investigation identified that Link Up workers tend to call on a range of 'core'³ (i.e. held by the majority of the workers who participated in the study) personal resources and assets to assist them in their role. These are explored in greater detail in Quine Time's report.

This paper seeks to move the analysis forward from a statement on what the core personal resources and assets of Link Up workers are, to, why do these resources and assets help to make a worker effective in a Link Up role?

To achieve this we have not undertaken any additional investigatory work. Rather, we have analysed the findings from the constituent parts of Quine Time's work and the inter-relationship between them; using this to derive the factors we believe help to make a Link Up worker effective.

Our analysis presupposes all Link Up workers are effective and are so because of their core resources and assets. In practice, the relative effectiveness of workers will be variable. Additionally, we have chosen to focus on the aspects of positive human functioning that Link Up workers have in common. However, the Quine Time study highlighted that workers are characterised as much by their differences as what they have in common. An analysis of the potential significance of these differences was beyond the scope of Quine Time's work.

Whilst recognising these limitations, we have concluded three factors are key. These, together with the supporting findings from Quine Time's work, are considered below:

1. Alignment with personal purpose, goals and values

Arguably, the most significant factor contributing to a Link Up worker's effectiveness is the strength of alignment in their purpose, goals and values in life with their role as a Link Up worker. In this regard, several elements appear to be core to Link Up workers:

- A concern for the welfare and interests of others over self.
- Non-acceptance of the status-quo combined with a readiness for change.
- To be instrumental in exploring and creating a better future that endures.

Intuitively one might have supposed these elements would be prevalent, even necessary for an individual to operate effectively in a role that is about enabling individual and community-led change. However, the value of Quine Time's work is in the explicit exposition of what purpose, values and goals matter to the workers and the illumination of the strength of alignment across them in both a work and personal capacity.

³ To ensure continuity with Quine Time's Report, here the term 'core' personal resource and/or asset is defined as: one scored by the majority of Link Up workers in the top two (*agree* or *strongly agree*) or bottom two (*disagree* or *strongly disagree*) response categories to each diagnostic assessment.

The significance of this understanding is that it suggests the Link Up worker's role gives them a stronger sense of meaning and fulfilment in life. This is borne out by the wellbeing assessments which indicated the majority of Link Up workers display high levels of psychological wellbeing. This inevitably helps to make them more effective.

2. A high degree of self-awareness and sense of what is important in life

Link Up workers display a high level of self-awareness. The catalyst for this is not entirely clear but could be due to a worker's exposure to unconventional experiences and people through their life-course as well as having a high level of responsibility and expectation placed on them from a young age - features common to several workers.

This self-awareness manifests itself in the worker's ability to draw on the lessons they have gained from personal life choices, using this to inform their choices in the present - both personal and work-related. This knowledge helps them to be more effective in their Link Up role; however, it also gives them a strong sense of what is important in life. The following appear to be critical in this respect:

- Supportive and rewarding personal relationships.
- Growth and development of self and others.
- Freedom to think, explore and operate independently.

A worker's self-awareness also extends to what is not important to them. For example, a key finding from the Quine Time study is that workers are not influenced by social status, prestige or power. Similarly, holding or being perceived to hold a position of authority is seen by most workers as being of limited relevance to the role they perform.

Whilst again these findings might not be totally unexpected they point to what motivates a worker. Additionally, the importance of providing a worker with the 'space' to think and act independently, says much about the type of autonomy a worker needs to be given to be at their most effective.

The Quine Time study also highlighted that a worker's self-awareness extends to their understanding of what it takes for them to be effective in their role with the majority of Link Up workers rating the following 'resources' as being the most relevant:

- Energy & passion;
- Social skills; and
- Self-discipline.

Furthermore, most workers exhibited a strong awareness of when they are at their best in a work context. Central to this is an understanding of:

- The type of situations in which they produce their most successful work;
- The physical environment that is most conducive to working effectively; and
- The time of day they tend to be most productive.

This personal knowledge is unique to each worker and is of value to them as it helps them to operate more effectively.

3. The 'right' personality

A Link Up worker's characteristic pattern of thoughts, feelings and behaviours are integral to how they react and interact with others. In this sense, there are two dimensions that are core to the majority of workers:

- 'Agreeableness' - they are considerate and value getting along with other people; seeking to build trusting, co-operative and appreciative relationships and an environment that fosters this.
- 'Low neuroticism' - they are calm, confident and emotionally stable, not easily stressed. Additionally, they proactively seek to reduce tension for themselves and others.

For most Link Up workers, these aspects are complemented to a material degree by personal strengths (i.e. a pre-existing capacity for a particular way of working that is authentic and energising) that drive them to make connections with and between people and an innate capacity to sense and understand what other people are feeling.

Again the above traits and strengths intuitively make sense in the context of the role of a Link Up worker. It is notable however, that they are underwritten by a positive perspective on what the future holds and how that future might be achieved:

- Being naturally inquisitive, seeking information in new and existing situations.
- Viewing challenging situations as an opportunity to grow and learn.
- A self-belief that goals will be achieved whatever the barriers.

So What?

The three factors above are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, Quine Time's study and our interpretation of the findings, point to a synergistic effect arising from the interplay between them. This re-emphasises the importance of taking a holistic view of what is going well with a Link Up worker.

In addition to achieving an improved understanding of what makes a Link Up worker effective, the findings from the study and our own experience have important implications for the Link Up programme, other organisations facilitating similar work and commissioners of such work. These are now considered.

Strengthened recruitment procedures

Inspiring Scotland will use the study's findings to enhance our procedures for the recruitment of Link Up workers. This is timely as we are seeking to expand the programme to new areas over the course of the next 12 months. Additionally, we acknowledge this as an aspect of the programme that needs improvement: in some of the existing Link Up areas, the local projects have experienced a high-turnover in workers⁴.

Our aim is to use the findings of the study to improve the job description and recruitment adverts to heighten the level of self-selection amongst the 'right' candidates and de-selection amongst less-well suited candidates. Additionally, the insights from the study will,

⁴ Some of this turnover has been for normal reasons (e.g. career progression, moving area, offers of permanent contracts); however, part of it has been driven by the recruitment of workers not suited to the role.

we believe, materially improve the interview process; enabling us to achieve a deeper understanding of the extent to which a candidate possesses the personal resources and assets required for the role.

Enhanced support for Link Up workers

The output from the study will also be used to improve the support mechanisms we ‘wrap-around’ Link Up workers. This is an aspect of the programme that has worked satisfactorily to date, identifying specific needs and offering training on issues such as mediation and conflict resolution, suicide prevention and evaluation. However, we recognise we can do more to help sustain and motivate workers in their role.

For example, whilst ‘energy & passion’ was rated as the most relevant resource for the purposes of their role, workers’ individual level of satisfaction with this resource was materially lower than the other two key resources (social skills and self-discipline). In part this reflects the demanding nature of the role, but also points to an area for development i.e. how better to support workers to maintain or increase their energy levels?

This type of support is significant, for as workers become more established in their community, their role becomes pastoral in nature, providing help and guidance on personal matters to those they are working with. This can take up a substantial proportion of a Link Up worker’s time and it is time given to those often experiencing the most challenging circumstances including: trauma, grief, loneliness, hunger, homelessness, abuse and feeling suicidal. Whilst this personal commitment to help others is partly what makes Link Up workers so effective, it can be detrimental to their own health and wellbeing.

In response, we are currently investigating the use of a range of additional support mechanisms including mentoring and professional guidance on sustaining and enhancing personal physical and mental wellbeing (including stress management, dealing with anxiety, mindfulness, health eating, relaxation techniques, dealing with sleeplessness etc..).

Importance of connecting with other like-workers

This has been an important component of the Link Up programme from the out-set through our quarterly Link Up ‘Portfolio Days’ where all Link Up workers get together with the Inspiring Scotland Link Up team. These sessions provide an opportunity to learn and share practice with other Link Up workers; however, their greatest value is in helping to forge relationships between workers. The cornerstone of this is the ability to spend time together and to have honest conversations about issues and successes.

There has also been a proliferation of asset-based programmes in Scotland over the past three years⁵ and associated with this, an increase in the number of asset-based practitioners. This wider church of individuals creates opportunities to develop more on-line and face-to-face connecting.

This is already starting to happen to some degree (e.g. through the Big Lottery and Inspiring Scotland’s Asset-based Community of Practice and an initial informal social gathering of workers in Glasgow) and we will seek to facilitate more of this. We hope that this will help to form a wider mutual support network for practitioners across Scotland.

⁵ Including, Big Lottery’s ‘Our Place’ programme, NHS Ayrshire & Arran’s ‘AHEAD’ programme, Glasgow Council’s Thriving Places Community Organisers, GCPH and SCDC’s ‘Animating Assets’ programme.

A 'fairer' Scotland needs more asset-based practitioners in our communities

After three and half years of operation across some of Scotland's most vulnerable communities, the learning from Link Up (including three independent evaluations) has led us to conclude that loneliness, low self-esteem and a lack of confidence are fundamental barriers to individual change. When these factors are prevalent across a significant proportion of a community's population, that community's ability to organise itself to look out for each other and to effect larger scale change for itself, and with others, is inhibited. This is more than conjecture as our evidence supports this view, but if we are correct, it has important implications for community empowerment and critically, how Scotland becomes a 'fairer' nation.

Link Up and other like-programmes are creating substantial bodies of evidence that support this position. More importantly, they are also offering insights as to how these challenges can be addressed. The role of the local worker goes to the heart of this because it is their practice that ultimately helps to engage those who are disconnected, build the capacity of local people to help themselves and each other, and empower communities to influence the decisions that affect their lives.

Inspiring Scotland has an ambition to see Link Up and/or other similar types of intensive neighbourhood community development programmes operating in all of Scotland's most vulnerable communities. This will require us to sustain and grow the number of local workers whose practice is assets-based. Consequently, we hope that the findings communicated in this paper will be of value to existing initiatives and the commissioners of new ones. We would also be delighted to share the output from the improvement work on our recruitment procedures and worker support mechanisms.

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