Stay Nimble

A NOTE ON EMPLOYMENT SUPPORT ORTHODOXY

Any Job, Better Job, Career

Where it came from, what fifteen years of evidence tells us, and why we now need to move beyond it.

Where it came from, and what it was answering

To judge ABC fairly you have to start with the problem it was built to solve, because that problem was real and it was well understood.

Through the 2000s, researchers at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and elsewhere documented what they called the low-pay, no-pay cycle.[1] The finding was sobering. Only around a quarter of people in low-paid work move permanently into higher pay over a decade. Most of the rest churn between low-paid jobs and spells out of work entirely, and a great many simply get stuck. The same research was emphatic that this was not a question of aspiration. It reflected the shape of the economy itself, a labour market that had hollowed out in the middle, with growth at the top and the bottom and a thinning of the mid-level jobs that progression depends on. The diagnosis, in other words, was structural from the very beginning.

The policy response was Universal Credit. The 2010 white paper, Welfare that Works, set out the design, and rollout began in 2013.[2] UC folded six benefits into one and replaced the old cliff edges, the points at which working an extra hour could leave someone worse off, with a single smooth taper so that work would always pay. For the first time, progression itself became a stated objective of the benefit system, not merely getting people into a job but helping them climb once there.

Then came the genuinely novel part, and the part that should give any exemplar-seeker pause. UC introduced in-work conditionality, the idea that the state would actively require people who were already working to earn more, with the same machinery of mandatory appointments and sanctions previously reserved for the unemployed. Nothing like it had been tried at scale anywhere. The minister responsible, Lord Freud, said so plainly, conceding that because Britain was among the first nations to attempt this, there was very limited evidence on what works.[3] A national operating model was being built on an admitted evidence vacuum.

“Any job, better job, career” is the front-line shorthand that grew up around all of this. It is the sentence a work coach can say, and the sentence that turns an untested and deeply structural problem into a tidy three-step journey. That story has stayed on the front line ever since. The most recent DWP-commissioned research, published this year, found that work coaches still commonly describe themselves as following the “any job, better job, career” approach.[4] So when people present it as an exemplar, they are not inventing it. It is genuinely the orthodoxy. The question is whether it deserves to be.

What it gets right

It would be dishonest to dismiss it entirely, because the first move has real evidence behind it. Being in work, even low-paid work, is generally better than being out of work. Accepting a low-paid job can prevent the scarring that long spells of unemployment leave on a person’s future prospects, and for people who have been out of work for a long time, or who have few qualifications, a modest job can be a reasonable way back into the labour market.[5] The "A" in ABC, taken on its own, is not foolish.

The trial that was meant to prove it

Because the policy was admittedly untested, the government did something rather creditable. It ran a proper randomised controlled trial, the gold standard of evidence and a rarity in this field. The In-Work Progression trial ran from April 2015 to March 2018, and just over thirty thousand low-paid Universal Credit claimants passed through it.[6] They were randomly assigned to three groups. One met a work coach fortnightly, one every eight weeks, and one had barely any contact at all, just an opening phone call and a single follow-up. The meetings and the agreed actions were mandatory for the two more intensive groups. What was being tested, then, was not support against no support. It was more conditionality against less.

The headline result was statistically significant and very small. After a full year, the people in the most intensive group, meeting their work coach every fortnight, were earning £5.25 a week more than the barely-supported group. The middle group were £4.43 ahead. A year of fortnightly mandatory meetings, in other words, bought about the price of a sandwich a week.

Even that modest figure has to be handled with care, for three reasons. First, the independent evaluators could not replicate it. The earnings effect showed up in the government's own administrative data, but the external evaluation found no statistically significant difference in participants' self-reported earnings.[6] Second, nobody knew whether it lasted. The department was candid that the impacts were small and would need to be tracked over a much longer period to see if any progression was sustained, and the trial only measured a single year. The whole promise of ABC is durable progression, and this evidence simply does not speak to it. Third, the gains came at a cost to claimants. The most intensive group had the highest sanction rate, roughly double that of the least supported group, and almost all of those sanctions, more than nine in ten, were imposed for the administrative offence of missing a meeting rather than for any failure to progress.[6]

There is a deeper point buried in the trial's own analysis. When the researchers looked at what actually moved the needle, it was not the frequency of mandatory contact. It was job-related training, where participants who trained saw greater earnings gains, and it was tailored support that addressed a person's individual barriers. Where the support was generic and a person's motivation was low, the trial found this often left claimants stuck or pushed them out of the labour market altogether.[6] The trial's own evidence, in short, points towards skills and careful, personal support, and away from the mandatory-meetings-and-sanctions machinery that ABC actually runs on.

The finding that undoes the whole model

The most important thing the trial produced is also the most overlooked, and it did not come from the claimants at all. It came from the employers. As part of the trial, the department interviewed thirty employers in the low-paying sectors where this group of workers are concentrated, and asked them directly about progression.[6] Their answer should be pinned above every desk where this slogan is still used.

The barriers to progression, the employers said, were mainly structural. There were simply too few higher-level roles to move into. Staff turnover was too low to free up the positions that did exist. Staffing budgets capped what could be offered in pay and in training. None of these are things a claimant can fix by trying harder, and none of them are things a work coach can fix in a ten-minute conversation.

And then the detail that quietly dismantles the entire model. The employers reported that progression opportunities, where they existed at all, were reserved for permanent staff. They were far less likely to be available to anyone on a temporary or zero-hours contract, or working through an agency. Which means that the people ABC is most often aimed at, those in insecure, low-hours, marginal work, are by the employers' own account the least able to climb, no matter how many appointments they attend or how motivated they are. The ladder the slogan promises does not exist for precisely the people standing at the bottom of it. Securing a permanent contract was itself the real first rung, and that is a structural condition, not an act of individual will.

The cost doesn't disappear, it moves

There is a particular sleight of hand in how ABC measures success. When someone reaches enough hours or earnings to come off intensive conditionality, the work coach conversations stop, and on the department's own ledger that looks like a result. But the person has not necessarily progressed. They have very often just become trapped a little higher up, in work that still does not pay enough to live on without help from the state.

The cost to the taxpayer does not disappear. It moves. The majority of working-age benefit spending in this country now goes to households where someone is in paid work, and that share has risen from around 40 per cent in the mid-1990s to close to 60 per cent two decades later.[7] As the Institute for Fiscal Studies puts it, these in-work payments are plugging the income gap left behind by a lack of pay growth. Put plainly, a large part of the welfare bill now functions as a subsidy to employers who pay low wages or offer too few hours. ABC can move someone out of the conditionality regime while leaving the public still paying for the shortfall in what their work actually provides. The metric improves. The underlying problem does not.

Whose responsibility is the climb?

This points to the deepest assumption inside ABC, and the one most worth challenging. The model places the entire weight of progression on the individual. It is your job to find the better job, your job to climb, and if you do not, the implication is that you have not tried hard enough. The behavioural framing of Universal Credit, built around responsibility and self-sufficiency, makes that assumption explicit.

But everything we have just walked through describes the opposite. Whether the rungs exist, whether there is a pathway between them, whether the labour market is creating better jobs at all, and whether anyone is helping people find and move into them, none of these are things an individual controls. They are collective, structural questions. Ensuring people do not get stuck at "A" is a societal responsibility, not a personal failing. ABC quietly relocates a problem that belongs to all of us onto the shoulders of the person least able to solve it alone.

What happened next tells its own story

It would be reasonable to assume that a model with such thin evidence behind it might have been quietly retired. The opposite happened. The voluntary, light-touch version of in-work support that ABC originally described, the one the trial was built around, has effectively been abandoned. The department's own research found little evidence that the voluntary offer worked, which it attributed in part to low take-up.[8] But rather than rethink the approach, the government made it harder. Through a series of increases to the earnings threshold that governs who faces mandatory conditionality, it pulled large numbers of low-paid workers out of the gentle regime and into the intensive one. Between September 2022 and May 2024, three such changes doubled the threshold and moved more than four hundred thousand working claimants into Intensive Work Search, with its fortnightly mandatory appointments.[9]

What that regime actually does is revealing. Work coaches told the department that the threshold creates an artificial cut-off and that what motivates people is not the prospect of a career but the "hassle factor" of mandatory appointments, which pushes them to scrape together enough hours to clear the threshold and escape the conditionality altogether.[8] That is ABC reduced to its barest mechanism. Not a job, a better job, a career, but earn just enough to make us leave you alone. Fifteen years on, the answer to weak evidence has not been to abandon the theory. It has been to apply more pressure to the same people.

Why this matters now

There is a reason to be blunt about this. The model rests on an assumption that instability is temporary, that a person passes through a difficult patch and climbs out of it, and that the job of support is to give them a nudge. The evidence describes something different. For a great many people, instability is not a phase. It is the ongoing condition of modern working life, and it requires durable infrastructure rather than a one-off push.

ABC is reasonable as a first move and unreasonable as a theory of progression. The one serious trial built to prove it found an effect worth a sandwich a week, could not show it lasted, and uncovered in its own employer research the reason it cannot work as promised. Held up as an exemplar, it lets a structural problem, where the better jobs are and how anyone is supposed to move between them, be quietly reframed as a matter of individual effort, and it lets a continuing cost to the public be recorded as a success. The people doing this work deserve a more honest account of what actually moves someone from a job to a better one, and that is the conversation worth having now.

Sources

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8 DWP, Universal Credit: In-Work Progression — Qualitative research with Jobcentre Plus staff, 2026. Little evidence of success in the voluntary in-work progression offer, attributed in part to low take-up; work coaches reported the AET creates an artificial cut-off, and that the "hassle factor" of mandatory appointments incentivises claimants to reach the threshold and escape conditionality, a short-term goal rather than sustained progression. gov.uk/government/publications/universal-credit-in-work-progression-qualitative-research-with-jobcentre-plus-staff

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