

# Self-assessed changes in mental health and employment status as a result of unemployment training

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## Abstract

The main question addressed in this article is: What factors in an unemployment programme serve both the individual and society? Our research focuses on background variables and process variables and how these can be assumed to affect certain dependent variables in unemployment training. The current focus is on the dependent variable “subjective assessment of the effect of the training on mental health”, together with the more objective dependent variable of “employment status after training”. Self-confidence, well-being, faith in the future, level of initiative and personal development have been used as indicators of self-assessed “mental health”.

Data were collected from an unemployment training programme in Sweden and the variables combined to create a hypothetical model. The model was statistically tested and then modified with the aid of LISREL statistics, which helps to adjust the model to statistical acceptance. The findings show that the salient factors directly related to the subjective assessment of the effect of training on mental health are gender, attitude to skills development, perceived training requirements and formal educational background. The latter relationship was negative. Of indirect importance are the level of commitment of the teacher, the satisfaction of the trainee with the process, and the level of control. The duration of previous unemployment was the only independent variable, which directly affected the employment status after the training, and this was in the negative direction. Of indirect importance for this dependent variable were training requirement, satisfaction with the process, own level of control and attitude to skills development.

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## 1. Introduction

The starting point for this study is an evaluation of an unemployment training programme known as Training Without Limits (TWL) produced specifically for Jämtland County in Sweden. The evaluation, which involved all course participants, was based on the first two years of the project. The more specific details of TWL include

adaptation to the individual, the use of IT-based distance learning and demand-led practical work in enterprises. The evaluation of TWL is one specific study within a larger EU project, “Balanced Information Technology (BIT)”, and in addition to the present paper it has also resulted in two working reports (Röjdalen, 1999, 2000).

A notable result of this study was that a very large proportion of the respondents to the self-assessment stated that their self-confidence, faith in the future, well-being, personal development and level of initiative are characteristics which have been affected positively as a result of the training programme (Röjdalen, 2000), as

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shown in Table 1. These characteristics will be taken together and will be known in this paper as self-assessed “mental health”. Alternative designations could be satisfaction or quality of life, but the choice of mental health is based on the fact that this is a concept, which often occurs in unemployment research (Hallsten, 1997; Warr, 1987).

From Table 1, it can be seen that between 52% and 69% stated that the training had affected these characteristics positively, and only 2–4% said that they had been affected negatively by the training. Alongside these individual goals it can be pointed out that TWL is a successful form of unemployment training as regards its societal goals. This was based on the employment which the respondents had at the time the measurements were carried out, between 6 and 30 months after the end of the training period (see Fig. 1).

At a time between 6 and 30 months after the completion of the course, 74% of the participants were employed within the framework of the goals of the training course—56% were employees, 7% owned their own companies and 11% had started further education. In all, 22% were either still unemployed or were occupied in some political employment initiative. The other 4% were on child leave, on sickness absence or

other reasons (Røjdalen, 2000). This finding is very much higher than earlier national studies.

It is of course valuable to discover what factors result in TWL being such a successful form of unemployment training, in terms of both individual goals and those for society as a whole. But the converse questions are also important: What parts of the training led to self-assessed negative effects on mental health, or why did the training not lead to employment? In this part of the evaluation study, a model has been created in order to illuminate those factors which are important in unemployment training, together with the effects of these factors on the various dependent variables.

The overall aim of the study was to determine which factors are important for

- (i) assessment of the effect of the training on mental health, and
- (ii) the employment status after the training.

## 2. Theoretical background

Many people have stated that mental health and employment are related, and the common thesis is that work is usually better for mental health than unemployment (Jahoda and Rush, 1980; Hallsten, 1997). Unemployment brings with it poor self-confidence, it makes the individual unmotivated (Jones, 1989) and apathetic (Ezzy, 1993). Previous work may be important regarding reactions on unemployment (Ezzy, 1993; Jones, 1989; Feather, 1990; Hallsten, 1995; Warr, 1987). Apart from the fact that unemployment has a destructive effect on mental health, it also leads, as Ackum-Agell (1999) pointed out, to work skills decreasing and becoming out of date.

Hallsten (1997) discusses whether unemployment causes ill-health (the binding hypothesis) or whether ill-health leads to unemployment (the selection hypothesis). He found that both explanations in combination, i.e. the “complementary model”, gained the greatest support. Unemployment (so-called binding effects) explained two-thirds of the mental ill-health, while one-third of the ill-health resulted in selection from the labour market. The conclusion was that the individual risks ending up in a vicious circle where an already poor state of mental health leads to unemployment, which further worsens mental health.

It is worth noting the actual importance of mental health in the context of the labour market. If the labour market measures are improved, these must be enriched by those qualities to be found in “good” work. The result of the measures should therefore not be seen just in terms of employability. Alongside these aims, as Mikkonen (1995) stated, employment training can also

Table 1  
Retrospective assessment of how training affected various characteristics of the participants

Characteristic	Positive	Not affected at all	Negative
Self-confidence	62.0	35.6	2.4
Well-being	52.4	44.2	3.4
Faith in the future	55.9	40.0	4.1
Initiative level	56.5	41.9	1.6
Personal development	69.4	28.9	1.7

The scale originally had five choices, but this was recoded to three alternatives (+, 0, -). The results are given in %.  $N \geq 812$  (Røjdalen, 2000).



Fig. 1. The employment situation of the course participants 6–30 months after the end of the training course.  $N = 818$  (Røjdalen, 2000).

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