

DFN Project SEARCH

Evidencing our model

Abstract

This review summarises findings from three peer-reviewed academic papers, one independent Social Return on Investment (SROI) evaluation, two external evaluations, and one independent overview of supported employment programmes. They indicate that the model delivers unmatched social, economic and health benefits to interns in the UK and abroad.

Background

Project SEARCH is an internationally recognised, evidence-based transition to work programme for young people with a learning disability and autism diagnosis developed in the USA. DFN Project SEARCH holds the exclusive master franchise rights in the UK, Ireland, and Iberia, and has been recognised by the UK government as a model of good practice within the national learning disability strategy “Preparing for Adulthood pathways”. DFN Project SEARCH currently operates over 70 sites throughout the UK.

Scope

This review summarises the following studies (references can be found on page 4):

- ✓ Social Value Lab (2013). “[SROI Evaluation Project SEARCH For North Lanarkshire Council](#)” (independent SROI – UK)
- ✓ Wehman, P. *et alia* (2016) “[Effects of an employer-based intervention on employment outcomes for youth with significant support needs due to autism](#)” (peer reviewed paper – US)
- ✓ Carol, S. *et alia* (2015) “[Employment Interventions for Individuals with ASD](#)” (peer reviewed paper – US)
- ✓ Christensen, J.J. (2015) “[Longitudinal outcomes of Project SEARCH in upstate New York. Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation](#)” (peer reviewed paper – US)
- ✓ National Development Team for Inclusion (2016) “[A Scoping Review of Economic Evidence around Employment](#)” (scoping review – UK)
- ✓ Kaehne, A., (2014) “[Final Report: Evaluation of Employment Outcomes of Project Search UK](#)”
- ✓ Frontier Economics (2022) “[Assessment of Economic & Social Benefits of DFN Project SEARCH](#)” (independent assessment – UK)

The studies included randomized control trials, quantitative and qualitative analyses, literature reviews and evaluations. While not exhaustive, they provide compelling evidence of the model’s effectiveness in the following areas: job outcomes; economic benefits, Social Return on Investment, and health, social and emotional gains.

Findings

Social Return on Investment: An independent evaluation of Project SEARCHⁱ established that a programme in North Lanarkshire created £3.96 for every £1 invested. The evaluation included social gains, such as increased confidence and improved mental health for interns, and economic ones, such as reduced use of health services for the NHS and saving in welfare benefits for the Government. It also showed that gains were shared among all stakeholders, largely benefiting the Scottish Government, North Lanarkshire Council, the NHS and young people with a learning disability and their families.

Job outcomes: A peer-reviewed academic paperⁱⁱ analysed the long-term outcomes of three Project SEARCH sites over five years in upstate New York. The paper shows that the average overall employment rate was 83% and the retention rate after one and four years were 82% and 44% respectively. Those were consistently higher than the average rate of other transition to work programmes in the region, which were 60% after one year and just over 20% after four years. The paper also indicated that Project SEARCH graduates were able to find new jobs when the initial one was not a good fit. There was an increase in the number of hours worked per week, from 22 to 24 hours in the first two years to 35 in the fourth year. Average salary went from \$8.65/hour in the first year (higher than the minimum in New York, \$8/hour) to \$11.24/hour in the fourth year. These impressive outcomes could not be consistently compared with other programmes as they did not report their outcomes.

Comparison with other schemes: According to an independent review of economic evidence of supported employment programmesⁱⁱⁱ by the National Development Team for Inclusion, Project SEARCH model is “markedly better when compared to conventional school-based employment support, namely better employment rates, higher average earnings, and jobs retained at follow-up” (p. 33).

A peer-reviewed randomized clinical trial^{iv} compared Project SEARCH plus Autism Spectrum Disorder support with traditional high school special education services in the USA. 90% of those who joined Project SEARCH acquired competitive, part-time employment earning between US\$9.53 and US\$10.66 per hour. Furthermore, 87% of those individuals had maintained their jobs at 12 months post-graduation. Only 6% of participants who went through high school special education services got a job after 3 months of graduation and 12% after by 12 months. The trial further evidenced that young people with autism spectrum disorder can gain and maintain competitive jobs.

Health, Social and Emotional Gains: Another independent, peer-reviewed randomised clinical trial^v showed that young people with autism spectrum disorder who acquired a job after joining Project SEARCH demonstrated improvement in all domains analysed. Participants who did not join Project SEARCH only demonstrated improvement in one domain. The paper also provided evidence of therapeutic benefits of employment for individuals with ASD. This is in line with a study done in the UK by Frontiers Economics^{vi}, which showed that DFN Project SEARCH not only improved the wellbeing and mental health of interns, but also benefits for families and society. The study showed that the programme can directly reduce government’s expenditure in welfare benefits, and expands and diversify the workforce.

Diversity: An evaluation of Project SEARCH^{vii} in the UK established that disability level, gender or age did not influence job outcomes. The study, however, did not analyse ethnicity, probably because of the small sample size at that point. The findings are in line with an in-depth analysis of DFN Project SEARCH data (please see a summary in *Our journey so far*). DFN Project SEARCH carried out its own [gender](#) and [ethnicity research](#) further exploring the points and presenting suggestions to ensure women and people from ethnic minority groups have the same opportunities in supported internships.

Summary of key findings:

Project SEARCH Findings	Compared to	References
Higher employment rates	Other programmes	i, iii, iv
Higher job retention	Other programmes	i, iii, iv
Higher wages	Wage average in the region	i, iii, iv
Higher working hours	Other programmes	i
Higher health, social and emotional gains	Other programmes	iv, v
High SROI	N/A	ii
Evidence based	Other programmes	i, iii
Diversity	National statistics - UK	vi

References:

ⁱ Social Value Lab, 2013. SROI Evaluation Project SEARCH For North Lanarkshire Council. DOI: <http://www.socialvaluelab.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/SROI-Report-Project-Search-Final.pdf> [Accessed 10 February 2021].

ⁱⁱ Christensen, J.J. (2015) “Longitudinal outcomes of Project SEARCH in upstate New York. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*” 42(3): 247 – 255

ⁱⁱⁱ National Development Team for Inclusion, 2016. *A Scoping Review of Economic Evidence around Employment Support*. DOI: https://www.ndti.org.uk/assets/files/Scoping_Review_of_Economic_Evidence_Around_Employment_Support.pdf [Accessed 14 March 2022].

^{iv} Wehman, Paul & Schall, Carol & McDonough, Jennifer & Graham, Carolyn & Brooke, Valerie & Riehle, Erin & Brooke, Alissa & Ham, Whitney & Lau, Stephanie & Allen, Jaclyn & Avellone, Lauren. (2016). Effects of an employer-based intervention on employment outcomes for youth with significant support needs due to autism. *Autism*. 21. 10.1177/1362361316635826.

^v Carol Schall, Adam P. Sima, Lauren Avellone, Paul Wehman, Jennifer McDonough, Alecia Brown; The Effect of Business Internships Model and Employment on Enhancing the Independence of Young Adults With Significant Impact From Autism. *Intellect Dev Disabil* 1 August 2020; 58 (4): 301–313. DOI:10.1352/1934-9556-58.4.301

^{vi} Frontier Economics (2022) “Assessment of Economic & Social Benefits of DFN Project SEARCH” (independent assessment – UK)

^{vii} Kaehne, A., 2014. *Final Report: Evaluation of Employment Outcomes of Project Search UK*. [online] Available at: <https://www.base-uk.org/sites/default/files/knowledge/Project%20Search%20evaluation%20%28August%202014%29/psreport15aug2014.pdf> [Accessed 12 February 2021].