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Thematic Learning Dialogues

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General Feedback Report TLD 1 – VDAB

‘E-Services and Channel Management’



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¹ DECISION No 573/2014/EU

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1. Introduction

The first Thematic Learning Dialogue (TLD) on "E-Services and Channel Management" took place on 26-27 February 2019 in Brussels. It was hosted by VDAB (Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding), the PES of the Flemish region of Belgium, with two experts each from the Participating PES of Slovenia, Austria and Latvia. In addition to that, one expert from each of the peer PES (Croatia and the Netherlands) acted as coach (i.e. giving peer support) for the Participating PES. The lead expert from the ICON consortium was in charge of moderating the TLD. Finally, one additional member from the ICON consortium attended the TLD as well as two representatives from DG EMPL. Prior to the event, dossiers on Participating PES and the Host PES were drawn up, checked and sent to all the participants and there was also a virtual 'kick-off' meeting. The virtual kick-off clarified the roles all the participants would have and discussed the expectations and the final agenda of the TLD.

2. Presentations by the Host PES

The starting point was a general introduction to VDAB's 'digital first' strategy. The key technological trends driving the change in digital services, as well as the changing expectations of customers, were outlined. The speaker explained in detail VDAB's digital first strategy and its underlying cascade system. This system starts with a digital first approach getting the online registration of all customers. This then leads to a follow-up call by VDAB's call centre within six weeks of registration (if a new job has not yet been found) prioritised through data analysis. Depending on the customers' digital skills and their need for counselling, face-to-face contacts at the local offices are then offered as a third possibility. Furthermore, Key Performance Indicators and the required staff skills for VDAB's digital first strategy were pointed out. Two crucial aspects were identified during the discussion of this presentation: on the one hand, the inclusion of customers lacking digital skills and foreign language speakers will require appropriate – possibly complex – responses. On the other hand, it became clear that VDAB's call centre was at the heart of this new strategy thereby creating a considerable shift in the nature of the contact between customers and their local PES.

The participants then split into two groups: technical experts and managers. The speakers addressing the managers described the organisational change process in the province of Antwerp in the course of which change in the digital strategy coincided with change in VDAB's sectoral approach². They highlighted two steps in this process – (1) "agreement about 'as is' " and (2) translating this into agreement about "to be". Here, the change of mindset on different levels proved to be essential, both inside the organisation as well as for the clients. This in turn called for strategies for sharing information about the ongoing change process and creating a sense of ownership of the new processes. The concurrent presentation of online tools for the technical experts was organised along VDAB's new customer journey, and it had detailed information on the registration process for customers and the vacancy dashboard. Here, the competence-based approach to matching was discussed as the core of this process. In order for this approach to work, and to bring employers and jobseekers closer together, the matching has to use the whole database. This specifically requires sufficient information on competences so the cooperation of both clients and employers is indispensable.

The second plenary in-depth presentation addressed the management of change and its implementation focussing on the first milestone of this process. This milestone contained

² In this approach, services are provided according to six economic sectors and one overall „sector“ for particularly vulnerable groups (the 'Intensive service cluster'). Every counsellor and every team leader works in a specific sector and works for both jobseekers and employers within that sector.

a) change in strategy, b) change in structure (bricks and bytes) and c) change in behaviour. One challenge in this change process concerned the communication of change. The different levels of staff were addressed in different styles and with different goals. For management, the communication was kept very transparent and open with the aim of creating ownership. To also create a sense of ownership for the project among the team leaders they were informed about both the process of change and its results. Communication with the workforce focussed on information with the goal of securing their commitment. The nature of the change was complex and contained several simultaneous processes. It was therefore necessary to relate the individual steps and their corresponding timelines to the "big picture" of overall change to identify inter-related processes and avoid unforeseen complications. Alignment between different timings was crucial in this process. Changes in products, processes and structures might proceed at a different pace in different regions or begin from different starting points, while needing to coincide with change at the national level. Furthermore, reinforcing managers and teams is essential in this change process, the speakers argued, as well as an ongoing exchange and close collaboration between the centre and the regions.

An additional presentation was held on the ongoing developments in the sphere of digitalisation and data analytics. Here, new approaches to jobseeker segmentation aimed at identifying and prioritising jobseekers according to their need for support were described, as well as the development of a new data platform and new matching strategies. The new data platform focussed on identifying similarities in sets of competences required for jobs across different sectors thus opening new perspectives on matching. While these developments presented new opportunities for addressing the challenges the PES are facing, they also encompass the issue of digital ethics. PES have to find appropriate ways of taking responsibility for the data they are collecting and using, displaying competence in their use and protection and subsequently promoting trust among customers and other stakeholders in these processes.

Finally, the possibilities of VDAB's 'Labour Market Explorer' were displayed after the official closure of the event. This interactive dashboard allows jobseekers to consult real time labour market information in a personalised way, starting from their competences. The design is conceived in such a manner that the visualised job details trigger self-steering and mobility, at regional as well as interregional level.

3. Working groups and their results

There were three group work sessions, each lasting from 90 to 120 minutes, including presentations and discussions of the individual results in a plenary session. For these sessions, pairings were made between Participating PES and the Host PES/supporting peer PES. Representatives from VDAB functioned as coaches for Latvia, a coach from the Netherlands supported the Austrian PES, while the Slovenian PES representatives were assisted by a coach from the Croatian PES.

The Austrian PES (AMS) currently follows a "multi-channel-strategy". Their main interest at the TLD was gathering information on VDAB's digital first strategy, its voluntary elements and the technical solutions and the applications they had installed. Although customers of the Austrian PES can currently choose which channel to use for the required services, the AMS staff encourage the use of digital channels (e.g. distribution of eAMS-Accounts). One challenge for AMS is their current IT situation. As AMS had to change its IT partner, there will be a transitional period of at least 2 years that will affect the further modernisation of the whole IT structure. One result of the group work was to clarify the best ways for communicating the results of the TLD within the Austrian PES and how to define the next steps. As an additional result of the group work, the Austrian PES received a recommendation from their peer PES. They recommended that in a change from a "multi-channel strategy" to a "digital-first strategy", the focus has to be on incremental change,

taking one (smaller) step at a time and exploiting its potential, instead of a sudden, fundamental and wide-ranging change. A further output of the group work was the idea of initiating an Inno-lab/thinktank involving multiple stakeholders such as social partners, staff and customers. By doing this, ideas for changes could be elaborated through a bottom-up process which tapped into the creativity of staff members.

The main interest of the Latvian PES (SEA) lay in the development of an e-application for granting 'unemployment status' as this process is the basis of all its services including the payment of benefits (SEA accepts applications for benefits while the actual payments are disbursed by another institution). The enhanced automation of registration is meant to allow a shift of staff resources from administrative work to quality counselling, while at the same time improving the quality of data and, in turn, the quality of matching. In order to achieve this, the procurement process was identified as a main challenge: a suitable contractor implementing the required IT services and in a timely and fully functional way was deemed hard to find, causing the risk of delays in the envisaged schedule. Furthermore, the communication of change in staff was addressed as an integral part of a successful implementation. This also included the necessity of changing some of the staff's job description. Connected to the planned digitalisation of services, a change in the mediation strategy, focusing on more intense counselling and less administrative approaches, was also discussed. Finally, the setting up of a Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle and corresponding KPIs were addressed. "Automatisation of decisions on unemployment", "the use of walk-in facilities", "the rate of complaints/customer satisfaction" and "change in customer behaviour" were considered as possible KPIs.

For the Slovenian PES (ESS), the development of e-portals for customers with automatic matching based on competences was their expressed field of learning at the TLD. The current process of mediation at ESS was considered too rigid and is scheduled to be improved by a competence-based approach to matching. Of high importance was the question of how much data and which data would be required for setting up such a system, e.g. with regard to a sufficient list of skills to include in the data. The matter of data requirements also extended to the question of the general improvement of existing services as well as the development of new services and the implementation of a digital first strategy. Due to the size of this project, the need to break down this process into manageable and prioritised steps was considered crucial. Further challenges referred to the need for coordination between two different contractors working on the IT system, another one was the necessity of securing ownership for this change process among regional directors, e.g. through shaping and assigning responsibilities. Also, the serious need for training staff to use the new tools and integrate them into a new approach to mediation was identified as a challenge, as well as developing a communication strategy that included all levels of staff.

4. Conclusion

Due to the relatively heterogeneous learning needs of the Participating PES, two different elements of e-services and channel management can be considered essential to the different change processes. For Latvia and Slovenia, their current challenge is laying the groundwork for a more sophisticated matching approach. This entails the development of an adequate IT infrastructure as well as defining and collecting required data from customers and employers to implement a competence-based matching approach. For Austria, a more advanced PES in this sphere, their focus is of a more strategic nature, namely: how can the opportunities of digital services be exploited through developing a coherent strategy for use by its customers? How to direct the appropriate group of customers to the appropriate available channels? Also, a more strategic challenge became apparent during the TLD: the issue of communicating the results of the event and its implications for the ongoing change process inside each Participating PES. Here, individual strategies have to be found which will also depend on the relation between the TLD's learning topic and an individual PES's overall change agenda.