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'How to prevent unemployment in a changing world of work?'

Workshop 5 "Communication about prevention measures"

Discussion paper



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<sup>1</sup> DECISION No 573/2014/EU

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## Introduction

A significant number of workers are likely to have to change careers due to technological change. We already have some hints about which upskilling activities might be the most important to smooth this transition; however, we know relatively little about how to convince employers and employees to expressly undertake training (which is starting to be supported by the PES) to prevent prolonged unemployment.

This paper intends to set the stage for the workshop on communication activities about prevention programmes. Communication and promotion of such programmes are extremely important, as it is widely known that those at risk of job loss due to technological progress are the least likely to receive employer-provided training or seek out training opportunities (see for instance: Nedeloska – Quintini (2018)). It has been noted that several recently launched upskilling programmes for employees have not been entirely successful in attracting clients, despite favourable financial conditions. At the same time, a significant part of the European labour force are likely to lose their jobs, and do not have sufficient skills to smoothly transit to other occupations. Hence, it is a priority to design communication strategies which not only raise awareness but also effectively lead to the take-up of upskilling activities. It is also essential to find out whether communication strategies directed at employees or employers are more useful. While PES have some prior experience in how to engage employers, it might be more complicated in the case of upskilling programmes which provide general knowledge to employees (typically during working hours).

## 1. Current measures implemented

Communication with the relevant stakeholders (employers' organisations, training providers, research institutes, etc.) needs to start already at the planning phase of prevention programmes. In this way, not only will stakeholders be aware of the programme, but services will be designed in such a way that they might be widely accepted. This was an important conclusion of the newly launched programmes of the Estonian PES, Töötukassa, as employers' organisations were consulted throughout the drafting process of the new 'Work and Study' programme. Communication with other public authorities is also essential to stay aware of other measures in place and to complement their strategies. Indeed, in some cases, the fact that a newly launched service overlaps with an existing one will hamper success. Furthermore, getting stakeholders on board early will facilitate communication activities down the line.

### 1.1 Communication channels used

Typically, when a new programme (service) is launched, campaigns are conducted via written media and telecommunication networks. The first step is usually sending information leaflets to employers and union representatives, as well as local labour offices. A second step is to have short broadcasts on radio and television, as well as in the written press. In these campaigns, it is crucial to keep in mind the potential particularities of the target audience (language, for example – in Estonia, Russian language communication was also important).

It is less clear to what extent more direct and less traditional communications channels are used. Direct marketing via emails (former) clients of PES does not seem to be widespread. Similarly, while information campaigns on the official social media channels of PES are regular, these are not necessarily targeted. Finally, there is some noteworthy use of public communication in places where (potential) clients might spend some time waiting. This can mean campaigns in public transport or short spots in public administration offices.

## 1.2 Getting stakeholders involved

Most PES have dedicated employer counsellors, and it seems that good personal contacts with firms are a first step towards convincing them to undertake actions which they would not initiate on their own. Furthermore, the experience of the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA) points to the fact that tailored counselling services for employers are an effective strategy to engage them. The BA has developed the new service of *qualification counselling*, a service targeted for SMEs. Specialised consulting staff support employers' planning processes, including upskilling, to fill job vacancies with less qualified existing staff. This programme seems successful as it seems to have changed the way companies view employee skills, while helping to promote active engagement in upskilling activities on the employers' part.

At the same time, it is also essential to convince stakeholders to disseminate information, as they can sometimes be closer to the target audience (this is of particular relevance in countries with strong unions). This action is actively used by the Cité des Métiers in Brussels, for instance, where NGOs in the field of career counselling attempt to engage clients and promote the use of the new establishment.

In some cases, especially when the target audience is disadvantaged or has a distrust of public institutions, this means that the PES does not necessarily need to be 'visible'. This might particularly be the case for young persons (prior to labour market inclusion), who are often reached by schools or youth counsellors<sup>2</sup>.

In many instances, upskilling programme promotion should go through training providers, whom both individuals and firms might already know and seek out. In particular, using the VET sector – to whom potential adult learners would often turn in the first place – to spread information about upskilling programmes seems a fairly obvious choice.

## 2. Challenges faced

Services and measures for those at risk of losing their jobs are relatively novel. Therefore, we have little evidence of what seems to work. It is clear that raising awareness has mostly been successfully achieved; however, we have very little knowledge about how awareness of the programme translates into participation.

### 2.1 Whom to convince?

First of all, many of the services and measures which provide upskilling activities to workers take place during work hours. This means that the employer needs to not only know but also support the employee participating in the courses. Thus, in most of the cases, the agreement is between three parties: the PES, the employee and the employer. This form has been tried and tested when it comes to hiring (wage) subsidies. However, we do not know which of the parties needs more convincing, hence more promotion. While this can largely depend on the already existing practices and form of cooperation, there is some evidence that working with employers is essential.

The question of how to work with employers is all the more important since, in the current labour market, there seem to be two phenomena appearing simultaneously. On the one hand, some of the tasks are slowly being automated. On the other hand, there is a shortage of (more skilled) workers who might be able to work with new technologies. In many countries – such as Malta – the shortage of labour is so severe that even though upskilling programmes cover wages (up to a limit), firms are unable to let employees participate in

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<sup>2</sup> We have not specifically encountered PES using methodologies which have been tried and tested for young adults for the case of employees at the risk of job-loss.

courses (during work hours). This is therefore one area where further research and probing is certainly needed. One potential way forward is to create personal training accounts and to guarantee employees' rights to training (as has been recently done in France).

Labour shortage is most likely to affect SMEs (which generally cannot compete in terms of wages with large employers), and it is generally assumed that (financially) supporting SMEs in their upskilling is needed. In general, one should highlight to employers the advantages of upskilling for company growth and productivity. It is particularly important within SMEs to raise awareness of the benefits of investing in their workforce and to help management to identify training needs in the context of the business. However, it still remains the case that workers at SMEs are half as likely to receive training.

## 2.2 Awareness or take-up

There is, at the same time, evidence that engaging and communicating with employees is similarly important. Indeed, one well-documented phenomenon is that higher-educated workers tend to undertake more training during their adult life than lower-skilled ones. Some recent evidence suggests that a large part of this happens through self-initiated off-the-job upskilling<sup>3</sup>. Thus there are some hints that the higher-educated are much more aware of the importance of upskilling than the lower-educated. It seems that training initiated by employers is related to the complexity of job tasks at hand, and that employers tend to provide upskilling activities to lower-educated employees in order to perform more complex tasks (potentially when new technologies are being implemented). Based on these findings, a pressing matter is how to convince lower-educated persons to initiate and undertake upskilling activities off the job.

Indeed, some recent research has shed light on the effects of communication on job seekers or clients who could potentially use services<sup>4</sup>. This is all the more important as we can assume that those who are at risk of losing their jobs are likely to be under-informed. This might be both about the risk of job-loss (current labour market conditions), and the benefits of upskilling activities. Furthermore, behavioural economics has shown that people can have difficulty exerting self-control in starting up and persisting in investment activities with distant payoffs<sup>5</sup>. This is all the more relevant in the case of measures and services for persons who have not lost their employment (yet). Altmann et al. (2018) analyse an experiment where jobseekers were provided with a brochure containing information about the state of the labour market and giving motivation to search for a job actively. It seems that precisely those who are the most vulnerable to long-term unemployment were the most positively affected.

The evidence is mixed on how far information and financial incentives can push jobseekers to start and partially self-finance upskilling courses at their own initiative. Görlitz – Tamm (2017) report on an experiment which provided a random sample of individuals with targeted information about the existence and conditions of a training voucher programme in Germany. However, the intervention did not increase the take-up of the voucher. The authors found three possible reasons for this. First, for a large number of individuals, there seemed to be no unmet demand for upskilling activities, as a large part of training in Germany is (partly) employer-financed. Second, some persons did not participate due to time constraints (travel time, caring for children, etc.) rather than due to financial constraints. Finally, for those who did face financial constraints, the 50% subsidy might not have been entirely sufficient.

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<sup>3</sup> See for instance Kramer – Tamm (2018).

<sup>4</sup> Please see Babock et al. (2012) for more examples and an overview.

<sup>5</sup> This is called present-bias (leading to time-inconsistent choices) in the literature.

More recently, van den Berg et al. (2018) analysed whether sending brochures to employees about a subsidised training programme for employees at SMEs led to the take-up of training roughly seven months later. The brochure both emphasised the importance of lifelong learning and informed about the training subsidy. They found that while the brochure increased awareness of the programme, it did not raise participation in the training subsidy. However, it did seem to induce male employees, particularly those who were at risk of job-loss, to take up self-initiated and self-financed training. It is worth noting that since participation in the programme would have been during working hours, workers needed employers' approval. Furthermore, it is not clear how much time is required between giving information about a programme and employees actually agreeing with their employers to participate in it. It might be the case that the information treatment actually had a longer-term effect.

### 2.3 Deadweight or fine-tuning

The main concerns regarding the targeting of public policies are (a) how to ensure that those who need the services the most actually use them, and (b) how to limit the number of those who would have undertaken such activity even in the absence of public support. In the case of services to prevent job loss, this is especially difficult, as PES do not have precise information on who ought to be their clients<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, in most countries, those who are presumed to benefit from upskilling the most are targeted rather broadly. In some countries, this means that eligibility is restricted to those working at SMEs, those with no vocational classifications, those with low incomes, older employees, etc. Furthermore, some of these target groups might receive more significant financial support than others. Often what goes hand-in-hand is that a three-way agreement between the employer, the employee, and the PES needs to be signed prior to upskilling activities. This implies that information can, in principle, be targeted to people who need the service (under the condition that the PES has relevant information about the characteristics mentioned above). However, potential beneficiaries might view procedures that give entry burdensome. By contrast, in a handful of other countries, services can, in principle, be accessed by all citizens, with financial conditions being much more advantageous for those who are considered disadvantaged. In this case, one might suspect that informing needs to be more widely focused, but it might come with the risk of having a larger deadweight loss.

This then begs the question of whether and how to use more fine-tuned communication techniques to reach those who need the services the most. In principle, for those persons who have been clients of PES, this might be possible, as the PES has sufficient information about them. PES which provide other services than simply unemployment benefits (such as in Slovakia or in Norway) will have the advantage of having accrued information on a large number of potential clients, even if they were not registered as unemployed. Even in these cases, a number of concerns remain. First, whether the information accessed by PES on potential clients is rich and precise enough to fine-tune targeting and communication; second, whether there are any ethical concerns with actively offering public services to some individuals but not to others.

### 2.4 Engaging with new clients

In the near future, automation and robotisation might affect the jobs of employees who have not (traditionally) been the clients of PES (typically those performing routine cognitive tasks). This is an issue in a number of ways. First, PES might not have (personalised)

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<sup>6</sup> An exception can be found in Germany where all workers who have received a notice of dismissal or have a fixed-term contract which is approaching its end are required to register at the BA as jobseekers.

information about them, so they will be difficult to reach. Second, these potential clients might not have trust in PES (might find it stigmatising to engage with PES). Third, PES do not necessarily have communication and out-reach strategies that are tailor-made to them.

A similar novel issue is that employers will have to be engaged to allow their employees to participate in PES services. This is a specific issue in the case of upskilling and preventive services since these, by definition, will provide general skills. Hence, participation in these services might be viewed by employers as an indication that an employee is making active efforts to change jobs. Thus, these services might need to go along with effective communication with employers to convince them of the value of having a skilled workforce.

### 3. Good Practices

#### 3.1 Cité des Métiers/Beroepenpunt Brussels

In broad terms, the communication strategy of the Cité des Métiers<sup>7</sup> (CDM) has two main channels. First, the CDM has its own media presence and campaigns. Second, partner organisations reach out to the potential audience via their own networks. In terms of communication, there was an initial launch campaign in March 2018 around the opening of the CDM. At that stage, there was a promotion in traditional media as well as a series of open workshops during the first opening week. In this initial stage of communications, the emphasis was on posters and flyers, which were circulated in partner organisations' locations. At the same time, partners promoted the CDM via information sessions, and associated partners also regularly organised group visits to the CDM for guided tours. Finally, the CDM website was launched in early June 2018, offering information and link-up with partners' websites.

The next stage of awareness-raising campaigns was launched in October 2018. This targeted a broader set of audiences, in particular young people furthest away from the labour market, by including posters on public transport, at youth organisations, and at different social services. An essential point of these communications was to rely on existing local networks to reach audiences. All these campaigns were there to promote the specific image of CDM (as distinct from the PES of Brussels), and to spread information about the main areas of activity of the CDM. It should be noted that guided tours for groups via stakeholder partners seem to be one of the most effective ways of engaging clients who might not necessarily visit the CDM on their own initiative.

There are some long-term plans for the development of communications for the CDM. First, to promote the CDM to more persons, a social media campaign will be launched. Second, to reach out to persons who are likely not in contact with public and social services, mobile promotion teams ('form trucks') will be used.

#### 3.2 Communication of the 'Work and Study' programme of the Estonian Unemployment Insurance Fund

It is important to first note that the need for creating and launching preventive measures<sup>8</sup> was also foreseen from the situation at the labour market, where the lack of skilled labour

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<sup>7</sup> The Cité des Métiers provides free lifelong learning counselling services. It is built on a partnership approach with the leading partners: Actiris (the PES in the Brussels Region), Bruxelles Formation (the agency in charge of professional training for French speaking jobseekers in the Brussels Regions) and VDAB Brussel (the subsidiary of the PES of the Flanders Region); as well as a handful of other partners from both Brussels and the Flemish Region.

<sup>8</sup> For further details see <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=20007&langId=en>



force was becoming a serious problem for the employers. The package of preventive measures was discussed initially with the cooperation agreement partners of EUIF in order to map down their opinions and put them to use. Meetings were also held with representatives from the Estonian Trade Union Confederation and the Estonian Employers' Confederation to hear about their expectations towards preventative measures.

The awareness-raising campaigns for preventive measures were run on a one-off basis in order to introduce or remind about the various possibilities provided by the EUIF for adults to improve their skills. The following communication activities were carried out in 2017 to raise awareness of the new opportunities:

- Advertising publications in Estonian and Russian:
  - Special leaflets targeted at employers and employees, introducing the new measures (under the slogan "Work and Study"), were produced and circulated;
  - Informative roll-ups (introducing the "Work and Study" measures) for all bureaus of the EUIF were put to use;
- Information sharing on the EUIF's webpage and on the EUIF's Facebook account (a special blog was created to promote the possibilities of the preventative measures);
- Direct e-mail marketing to potential target groups of the preventative measures (according to the data available at EUIF's database, all people who belonged to the target group of preventative measures received an e-mail introducing the new possibilities in May 2017; the action was repeated in the autumn of 2017);
- Short audio/visual videos for Radio and TV:
  - Radio stations that circulated the audio clips in nine different radio stations;
  - Videos (mute) were shown at the Police and Border Guard Board's regional offices (at the waiting area for people who apply for identity documents);
- In cooperation with the Estonian National Broadcast: a TV broadcast (starting from 2017) is being produced (the content-related comment is always added by EUIF) along with a TV broadcast in Russian – various videos are shown to introduce the possibilities of preventative measures;
- Content Marketing:
  - Special series of articles/sections were produced in various newspapers (to promote the awareness and opportunities of the new preventative measures under the slogan "Work and Study");
- Information sharing at job fairs and other informative events organised by EUIF.

### **3.3 Randomised control trials about awareness raising in Germany**

In 2010-2012, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research sponsored an evaluation study about a training voucher (Bildungsprämie, introduced for employees in 2008, in order to encourage them to participate in lifelong learning). In a randomised field experiment, a treatment group of eligible employees was given detailed information by telephone about the voucher, its conditions, and how to obtain it. Both the treatment and the control group were drawn from a representative sample of eligible employees, and they were not aware of participating in an experiment at any time. At the time of the first interview, only one-fourth of the eligible employees knew of the existence of the voucher programme. By comparing the treatment groups' voucher take-up in a follow-up survey one year later with the corresponding outcomes of the control group, the research revealed whether it is the information constraint or whether it is the voucher itself that was responsible for low take-up rates.

In a study funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), researchers tested the effectiveness of an information intervention about an upskilling programme for employees of SMEs (the WeGebAU). The information treatment consisted of a brochure which contained information about WeGebAU and its entitlement conditions, as well as pointing out the importance of life-long learning. This was mailed to the home addresses of a large sample of randomly selected workers in SMEs. Six to eight months later, a telephone interview was carried out to enquire about awareness of the WeGebAU programme, participation in (unsubsidised) training, and reasons for (not) participating in the training. The data of the survey was linked to administrative data (social security records) of both the participants and a control group to obtain labour market information.

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