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When the Client Becomes Her Own Caseworker: Dislocation of Responsibility through Digital Self-Support in the Swedish Public Employment Service*

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnography in the Swedish Public Employment Service, this article compares caseworkers' and local managers' perceptions of changes towards increasing digital self-services for clients. Findings reflect a conflict of interest between different service ideals: vulnerable subjects in need of personalized guidance (caseworkers) versus competent subjects ready to manage their own unemployment via digital self-services (local managers). As we argue, the dislocation of responsibility via digital self-services serves to reinforce responsibilization, thus turning the client into her own caseworker. This development runs the risk of pushing vulnerable groups even further away from employment than they already are.

Zusammenfassung: Wenn die Klientin ihre eigene Sachbearbeiterin wird: Verlagerung von Verantwortung durch digitale Selbsthilfe in der schwedischen öffentlichen Arbeitsverwaltung

Mit einem ethnographischen Ansatz werden Erfahrungen von Vermittlungsfachkräften und Managern der öffentlichen Arbeitsvermittlung in Schweden untersucht, die sich im Zuge einer Umstellung auf digitalisierte Dienstleistungen gesammelt haben. Die Ergebnisse deuten auf einen Interessekonflikt zwischen unterschiedlichen Serviceidealen und ihnen zugrunde liegenden Bildern von den Personen hin, an die sich die öffentliche Arbeitsvermittlung richtet: dem verletzlichen Subjekt, welches persönliche Betreuung braucht (Vermittlungsfachkräfte), im Gegensatz zum kompetenten Individuum, welches bereit

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ist, mit Hilfe des digitalen Services selber Verantwortung für die Arbeitslosigkeit zu übernehmen (Führungskräfte). Der Artikel zeigt, dass die Einführung von digitalisierten Dienstleistungen zu einer Verantwortungsverschiebung führen kann, insofern Arbeitsuchende zu ihren eigenen Sachbearbeitenden werden. Diese Entwicklung birgt das Risiko in sich, dass sich schutzbedürftige Gruppen von Beschäftigungschancen entfernen.

JEL-Codes: H75, I38, O38

Keywords: street-level bureaucracy, caseworker-role, dislocation of responsibility, digitalization, digital self-service, activation, equal treatment, vulnerable groups

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that frontline welfare state bureaucrats matter in the implementation of activation policies and delivery of welfare services (*van Berkel/van der Aa* 2012; *Brodkin* 2011; *Evans* 2011). Already in the 1980s, *Lipsky* (2010/1980) stressed the importance of investigating street-level public human services workers and their scope for discretion in decision-making through face-to-face contact with citizens to understand local policy outcomes. However, in recent years, there has been a general change towards increasing digitized welfare services, thus replacing human interactions with technology. In Sweden, the Public Employment Service (PES) has shown such a development. In 2014, a major organizational reform called the *Renewal Journey* (Förnyelseresan, in Swedish) was initiated to make the state agency more customer friendly and efficient by intensely developing digital self-services for clients. Digital services for jobseekers were supposed to be cost saving and to free up time from the caseworkers' work tasks, enabling them to allocate more time to 'qualified support for jobseekers who are far from the labour market' (IAF 2018, S. 9; Statskontoret 2019). However, digital self-services means that jobseekers will no longer have a personal caseworker. Above, physical visits and personal interactions with caseworkers will be radically reduced since clients will get more automated and remote support. From a PES perspective, the development encompasses a shift in the caseworker role and view of clients 'from my customer to the customer's case' (Statskontoret 2019). PES central management stressed that the 'digital transformation' will give jobseekers tools and conditions to act and become more independent in finding a job (PES 2017). Thus, the implementation of digital services in the PES entails that clients will need to enrol and report their activities without a personalized support from caseworkers.

The development towards digital self-services and self-management can be understood in light of a dislocation of responsibility in labour market policy, where social responsibility has shifted from the welfare state to the individual

citizen (*Serrano Pascual* 2007). Thus, there is a general trend towards activation (*Serrano Pascual* 2007; *van Berkel/Hornemann Møller* 2003), where jobseekers are expected to display an 'enterprising self' (*Miller/Rose* 2008) by being active, showing entrepreneurial attitudes, and being adaptable to a changing labour market (*Garsten/Jacobsson* 2004). The shift towards activation has entailed an individualized view of unemployment, in that it is the jobseeker's characteristics and abilities that are in focus and are subject to change (*Serrano Pascual* 2007, *Jacobsson/Seing* 2013). The present article considers the move to digital self-services with reduced personal support as a further phase in activation by making jobseekers even more responsible for resolving their unemployment situation. The development implies further distancing of the relationship between clients and caseworkers, increasingly transferring responsibility for finding employment from caseworkers to the clients themselves. In addition to requiring jobseekers to become activated by developing an enterprising self, they are expected to assume administrative responsibility for their 'case' and have the digital skills to self-manage their unemployment.

The aim of the present article is to compare caseworkers' and local managers' perceptions of changes towards increasing digital self-services in the PES. The analysis focuses on local managers' and caseworkers' divergent constructions of client-roles that emerged in the data, as well as their views of the caseworker-role as a result of the dislocation of responsibility from the state onto the jobseeker. Based on the results of this study, we argue that digital self-services serve to reinforce the responsibilization of the jobseeker, turning her into her own caseworker.

The article begins by contextualizing digital self-services in employment service encounters and the implications of this development for street-level bureaucracies. Thereafter, we provide a background of the organizational reform in the Swedish PES, the Renewal Journey, followed by a description of our fieldwork. Finally, our findings are presented and further discussed in a concluding section.

2. Digital Self-Services in Street-Level Bureaucracies

Based on the ideas of New Public Management, the public sector in many Western countries has undergone major administrative changes during recent decades, with efforts to make public agencies more business-like. These governing ideals have had a major impact on many welfare state bureaucracies and street-level workers by challenging established professional and bureaucratic norms (e. g., *Pollitt/Bouckaert* 2011). Digital self-service in street-level bureaucracies has increased significantly in recent years and can be seen as a tool for making public organizations more efficient and customer-oriented (*Lindgren*

et al. 2019; see also *Pollitt/Bouckert* 2011). However, *Pors* and *Schou* (2021, S. 161) described how public digitalization policies often are based on neoliberal ideas that promote citizens as responsible subjects who 'must be protected from the grips of the state'. Based on this logic, jobseekers are treated as strong and responsible individuals who can handle the case-processing themselves (instead of the caseworker) via digital self-services, thereby becoming empowered and able to influence their own welfare.

Investigating how and to what extent digital self-services and automation in frontline work affect and change street-level bureaucracy and the role of caseworkers is a growing research area (see, e. g., *Breit*/*Salomon* 2015; *Buffat* 2015; *Hansen* et al. 2018; *Lindgren* et al. 2019). In view of the transformation of public decision-making into digital platforms, the very essence of street-level bureaucrats as a function that requires people to make decisions about other people based on human judgement (i. e., discretion, see *Lipsky* 2010/1980) may be called into question. The implementation of digital client self-service, or more precisely information and communication technology (ICT), often limits direct contact between citizens and service providers (*Buffat* 2015). *Bovens* and *Zouridis* (2002) introduced the concepts of 'system-level bureaucracy' and 'screen-level bureaucracy' to illustrate this technological shift, where citizens interact with technology and systems instead of street-level workers. Moreover, researchers have emphasized how technology challenges caseworkers' actual function and significance in frontline welfare work, a work role that may become obsolete through technical development (*Dunleavy* et al. 2006). Here, the main task for caseworkers is to provide predictability and legal certainty based on standardized algorithms (*Lindgren* et al. 2019), leaving little or no room for administrative freedom (*Bovens/Zouridis* 2002).

The research has revealed that the shift towards digital self-services in welfare state organizations is closely linked to a broader development in public policy strategies, where citizens are seen as and made into co-producers of public services (*Eriksson* 2012; *Breit* et al. 2014; *Pors/Schou* 2021). Thus, clients are not only consumers or users of public services, but also play a central role in shaping the services they receive (*Breit* et al. 2014; *Fotaki* 2011). Digital self-services give citizens more influence and responsibility in welfare services and entail greater availability of services, as clients can at anytime and anywhere contact welfare state providers and search for relevant information. From an organizational perspective, digital self-services have also contributed to more (administrative) efficiency/reduced administrative workload, because the responsibility for administration has been transferred to technology and the clients themselves (*Breit* et al. 2014; *Dunleavy* et al. 2006).

The implementation of digital self-services has large consequences for the organizational context as new professional roles within the organisation might

emerge based on the interpretation of directives in practice (*Evans* 2016). In a Swedish PES context, *Nord* (2017) identified an emerging dislocation of responsibility through digital technology which transformed the professional role of PES caseworkers into administration, audits and control rather than the provision of guidance and support for clients. However, *Assadi* and *Lundin* (2018) found that the behavior among caseworkers in the Swedish PES changed along with job tenure: a senior front-line welfare state bureaucrat relies less on standardized tools, as s/he views him/herself as a generalist rather than a specialist. Therefore, managers might face more obstacles and resistance towards organizational changes among senior workers compared to newly recruited ones when implementing new policies, techniques and organizational tools. Despite official reports and audits, there is little research on the effects of the implementation of digital self-services on caseworker behaviour in the Swedish PES. Studies of frontline service provision in, to Sweden comparable, Norwegian welfare bureaucracies have shown that an implementation of digital service encounters allowed frontline workers to 'outsource' their previous responsibilities onto the clients. In such contexts with emerging client self-service, 'noise reduction' (*Breit* et al. 2020, S. 6 ff., 8) often appeared, where frontline workers became more restrictive in their client responses, thus reducing their availability. Caseworkers may then start favouring clients with a quick 'recovery' prognosis (*Lipsky* 2010/1980), that is, clients who are ready to handle digital platforms autonomously. Thus, implementation of digital technology will most likely affect the everyday life of frontline workers in the Swedish PES, affecting their client-relationship.

From a client perspective, research also highlights critical aspects of digitalization. For example, several studies have stressed that co-production may run the risk of turning into something that is forced on clients, as public responsibilities are transferred from the welfare state/caseworkers to the individual (*Eriksson* 2012; *Breit* et al. 2014; *Fotaki* 2011; *Pors/Schou* 2021). Instead of being a co-producer of public service, the co-producer is transformed into a responsiblized user (*Fotaki* 2011). In such a 'self-service society' (*Eriksson* 2012), clients are seen as autonomous actors, and the dislocation of responsibility forces individuals to become self-governing (*Pors/Schou* 2021). Research has also identified a 'digital divide' and unequal distribution of ICT among citizens based on lack of access to: 1) technological tools (computers, mobile phones and the like) or 2) relevant knowledge and skills for handling technological solutions. Thus, the likelihood of citizens making full use of the 'digital opportunities' offered in public services depends on their technological skills or skill deficits, dimensions that may be intensified when clients are supposed to 'self-manage' (*Breit/Salomon* 2015, S. 301; see also *Böhringer* in this issue).

3. The Swedish Public Employment Service: Policy and Organizational Context

The PES constitutes one of the largest state agencies in Sweden, in that it is responsible for implementing national labour market policies. The agency provides the Swedish population with welfare services related to an existing focus on active labour market policies and programmes, thus dealing with a large part of the Swedish public sector. The overall responsibility of the PES is to promote a functioning labour market and, especially, to work with jobseekers who are far from employment (Ordinance 2007, S. 1030). All recipients of unemployment benefits are obliged to register with the PES. Thus, caseworkers have the dual role of both controlling and supporting clients (*Walter* 2015). At the time of the present study (2017 to early 2019), caseworkers in the PES frequently encountered their clients in physical customer centres ('Direct Support Service') that were open daily, on the web or phone as well as through workplace visits. Hence, the digital systems were not yet fully implemented in practice. At the time of study, PES caseworkers were organized based on different labour market measures and client needs, e. g., jobseekers with disabilities, long-term unemployed, new arrivals and immigrants, and supported employment. PES staff could also be responsible for contacts with employers or be 'specialists' (e. g., psychologists or occupational therapists) working with clients with disabilities. The new digital organization under implementation, however, means that caseworkers would become more specialized, their professional employment-matchmaking aimed at either employers or jobseekers – no longer both groups.

Existing management ideals tied to the emerging digitalization and client self-support in the PES reflect a broader discourse of responsibilization that has dominated Swedish labour market policies since the 1990s. This development has lowered the Swedish Welfare state's previous universal ambition of 'full employment' in favour of 'low inflation' as a policy priority (*Hort* 2015); it has further shaped public expectations in line with the work-first strategy. Since then, a large group has been defined as outsiders/living in outsiderhood (*utanförskap,* in Swedish) due to their low employment outcomes (*Bengtsson/Jacobsson* 2018). Today, such individualized framing of unemployment is still evident. However, with the new management ideals connected to client self-support emerging, new conditions for the relation between clients and welfare professionals are taking form.

The organizational reform (Renewal Journey) of 2014 in the PES can be seen as an attempt by the central management to encourage caseworkers to feel committed and loyal to the organizational change. By 2021, digital services were to be an implemented standard and the first-hand choice of jobseekers and employers when encountering the agency (Statskontoret 2019). For example, use of

a personalized e-license is seen as a possibility to offer 'better service and faster help' (IAF 2018, S. 13). Such implementation of digital self-support for clients can be considered part of a broader trend within Swedish politics and welfare policies, seeking to shape the culture and norms of Swedish welfare organizations and make them more resource efficient (SOU 2019, S. 43). Meanwhile, the changes initiated were communicated as a desired service:

> Today, the agency [the PES] is heavily based on local and regional structure, which means that clients' personal meetings in local employment offices play an overly central role. The greater part of our operation is governed based on those local branches. But when increasingly more clients are requesting services through digital channels, the PES needs to design their service to respond to new patterns of local customer flow, in view of the digital world (PES 2018, *authors' translation*).

Therefore, local managers attended courses and events at the head office to learn 'what the customers required', i. e., modern techniques seen as a solution to many of the existing problems the PES faced. The management philosophy during these events aimed to shape and govern all employees within the agency. Caseworkers were supposed to implement the new directives that local managers brought back to the local offices, a 'necessary' development, 'demanded by the customers', following similar developments in other major welfare agencies (see also IAF 2018; Statskontoret 2019).

Thus, the major organizational reform reflects an organizational shift that most likely affected the caseworker role and the client-caseworker relationship. One particularly drastic organizational change connected to this reform was that clients' opportunities to have spontaneous physical encounters in local PES offices will be reduced, in favour of more general, standardized support via a centralized 'Direct Support Service'. This development, which created a more impersonal and distant relationship between clients and caseworkers, is important to understand and analyse from a local frontline perspective by taking into consideration the experiences and perceptions of local managers as well as caseworkers.

4. Data and Methods

The present article draws on extensive ethnographical fieldwork in two local PES offices, including observations and semi-structured interviews conducted in 2017 as well as two caseworker interviews in 2019 at a third local PES office.

Observations took place in both formal and informal workplace gatherings, such as workplace/team/staff/section meetings, staff training sessions, workshops, result dialogues, customer centres, office spaces as well as during coffee and lunch breaks. We also shadowed caseworkers in their daily work, including interaction with local managers during internal meetings. The data collection took place for a total of 15 weeks in two of the local PES offices, five weeks at

one office and ten weeks at the other. Fieldnotes were taken either during meetings or after informal gatherings, focusing on the content of the meetings, discussions and negotiations among participants. Observations of client interactions were excluded for reasons of confidentiality.

The interview study consists of 45 semi-structured interviews conducted in the three local offices: 39 with caseworkers (including 'specialists' working with jobseekers with disabilities) and six with local managers. The interviews took place in separate rooms at the workplace and lasted between 45 min and >2 hours. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and finally coded using an inductive, grounded-theory-inspired approach and a two-stage coding practice. The coding involved an initial coding of a descriptive reading of the interview transcripts, section by section and line by line, followed by more focused coding (along with *Charmaz* 2014). The initial coding process focused on general perceptions of the implementation of the new organizational reform. Focused coding allowed us to distinguish patterns in the data, a process that made visible the clear differences between caseworkers' and local managers' views on implementing digitalized services for clients. Some quotes include minor changes for improved readability, without jeopardizing content. Given that more caseworkers than local managers were interviewed, it needs to be noted that managers were a rather homogeneous group in terms of professional background, while caseworkers had a more varied background. Our analyses of the local managers' and caseworkers' perceptions were constantly validated via field notes.

5. Findings

5.1 Digital Self-Service: Local Managers' Perceptions

5.1.1 The Competent Subject: Give the Case Back to the Client

Fieldwork and interviews revealed how managers support and embrace the organizational reform towards increased digital self-services for clients in the PES. Digitalization was seen as a self-evident development that the caseworkers must adapt themselves to. The managers often underlined that digital computer technology 'facilitates our lives' as citizens by giving jobseekers tools to act on their own so as to become self-governing and more independent. Local managers' agenda to encourage clients to take responsibility and 'own their own cases' reflected motives put forward by central management in the head office and the general director; that clients themselves demanded more digital (self-)services and flexibility. From a management perspective, caseworkers must therefore change their view and understanding of their professional role as well as their view of clients.

During a staff meeting, one manager explained to caseworkers that the head office was increasingly emphasizing distance customer service (via ICT or telephone) in their budget calculations. Therefore, the local offices were required to adapt to this development, and digital self-services needed to be seen as an *investment*, not a matter of choice. In fact, an often-repeated mantra among managers was that digital solutions provide opportunities to relocate more resources to vulnerable groups. One manager explained that the present digital priority was necessary due to the high demand for the agency's services and resources. Importantly, the PES was considered to be wasting resources when caseworkers got personally involved and engaged. For this reason, clients needed to self-manage and become more responsible for their own situation. Digitalization and client self-management was described by local managers as a way to make use of existing resources in the 'best way possible' (Local manager 6). Therefore, clients needed to start guiding themselves and assuming more responsibility for their unemployment and job-seeking process; clients must become 'self-leaders'. An interviewed manager put forward that there is a need for the PES 'to give customers back their own cases'. In fact, the client is no longer to be seen as a case, instead 'the client *has a case* at the PES, which is why clients need to actively assume responsibility, learn to behave and 'simply become grown-ups' (Local manager 3).

> What's the degree of digital maturity in our agency? It's about directing the focus and handing the customer back her own case, that the client *is* not a case but instead owns a case, this is the journey we need… To hand it back and allow our customers to become grown-ups, in a nutshell. (Local manager 4)

Thus, the PES clients were framed as customers, and they now needed to play a more active role, while caseworkers instead had to work with more passive and standardized service provision.

5.1.2 Becoming a 'Modern' Agency

There is a view among managers (which also is experienced among some of the junior caseworkers) that the PES needs to become more like other large, 'modern' Swedish welfare agencies. PES and caseworkers were required to set up boundaries and restrictions for jobseekers, e. g., clients must stop viewing the PES like a cosy place that provides any type of comfort and support. Managers (and some caseworkers) often stressed that the PES was the only agency in Sweden where clients still could enter a local office without an appointment and receive personal guidance and support directly from a caseworker, claiming that 'we're the worst of all agencies'. Thus, managers considered the PES too accessible, because caseworkers were spending too much time in customer service, giving clients individualized and personal service that no other agency in

Sweden currently provided for clients. Moreover, managers stressed that caseworkers often acted more like therapists and counsellors for clients, who in turn told them all kinds of life stories, and that such situations were too time-consuming and inefficient. Instead, the PES needed to 'close the warm shelter' (Local manager, fieldnotes) and let clients start acting themselves.

Another aspect of reducing caseworkers' personal involvement in particular cases, e. g., by letting clients take more responsibility for their own case, was evident in the promoted ideal of equal treatment of clients. Digitalization and reduced personal contact were justified and legitimized based on the importance of equal treatment within the agency. This ideal accentuated that the existing practice, where caseworkers have close contact with 'their own' clients, was considered to cause an 'unequal' personal client-caseworker encounter (Local manager 2). From a local manager perspective, equal treatment of clients suggested that caseworkers needed to start changing their attitude towards their job and work role, which necessitated a new workplace culture:

Local manager 6: We need a new workplace culture… it's not the caseworker's case anymore, it's the client's own case… the unemployed person herself is responsible for her case, a caseworker can give support, but it's the unemployed person's own responsibility; 'What kind of support do you need? Is it guidance, counselling? Well, then I know someone else who works with guidance…' In this way, we become more specialized; we change from generalist to specialist. The client needs to carry her own case, this is where we need to enter, as a support service; 'What do you need?' As well as transitioning from customer service to appointments booked in advance. You need to sort yourself out in this 'Direct Match' [*Matcha direkt*] and there's an online chat, Facetime, everything is available digitally. […]

Interviewer: But this means quite a large change for caseworkers, for the caseworker role.

Local manager 6: …'I have had my jobseekers' towards 'now I provide a service' and [one should] be able to limit oneself.

To promote the PES as a service provider, local managers strived to create digital awareness within the whole agency, especially among caseworkers. Meanwhile, these managers also said they had been more or less forced to implement and promote digital technologies and support even for clients, meaning that even if it's considered a potential danger, it's still a necessity. Hence, awareness of the fact that these digital systems might not be appropriate for all clients was also put forward; everyone cannot handle the technical solutions, as some are simply more independent digital users than others:

> [T]hese days, many people have a mobile phone, several of them, even newly arrived, and there are language translation tools and mapping tools that the Migration Board tried out which are fantastic. Are we supposed to judge them, or don't we believe they are capable? Self-registration was carried out in [suburban area], and a high percent-

age chose to register, to give it a try. It's dangerous, technology might not be the saviour for everyone, but we have to try (Local manager 6).

Thus, managers acknowledged that implementing and promoting more digital solutions via web-support or telephone was a necessary – though potentially risky – business, and that some clients may be left behind.

5.2. Digital Self-Services: Caseworkers' Perceptions

5.2.1 The Vulnerable Subject: A Need for Personal Contact and Guidance

Many caseworkers raised critical concerns about the organizational ideal of implementing digital solutions so that clients can start taking charge of their own case. Communication with external actors via digital support was seen as a substitute for more personal caseworker-client encounters. In the interviews and observations, one reflection from caseworkers was that the organizational reform was based on images of a jobseeker who is strong, driven and motivated. The changes are aimed at clients who have sufficient social and cultural resources to comprehend the digital self-services independently and, thus, are capable of managing their own unemployment situation. Caseworkers criticized how the development towards more digitalization and impersonal client contacts only targeted a minority of all of the jobseekers the PES was responsible for working with. As reflected in the following fieldnote:

Caseworker: This development [digital self-service] aims at those 25 % of the PES who are self-reliant. Those who can take care of themselves. But we, those who work with the other (75) percentage, don't benefit from this development.

Local manager: Let's not underestimate that group either. They're also capable. I believe that they just need to think in a new way. (Staff-meeting, field notes, June 17, 2017)

Besides, social skills were believed to become even more important with the implementation of web-support and client self-management. According to caseworkers it would be difficult for jobseekers with social problems to rely on *different* caseworkers who give general support and information instead of having 'their own' caseworker who is available for support when required. Such relationship-building between a specific caseworker and a client was mentioned as even more important for jobseekers who had been disconnected from the labour market for a longer period due to, e. g., sick leave, disabilities or social problems:

It's difficult for me to see [digital self-service] in our group of clients, this maybe works out for people who've had few problems along their way, but I believe that, for those who are ill or have other difficulties, it's really complicated to talk to different people every time. (Caseworker 8)

The critical consequences put forward by caseworkers refer to the large amount of 'non-digital' clients they help and encounter daily; ICT was therefore not seen as beneficial for the non-digital group:

> [U]nfortunately, we're going increasingly digital, things are more digital and the question is: 'for whom?'. We still have generations who have not used a computer all of their life. Not all jobseekers send in an activity report over the Internet every month. I still receive filled in paperwork and therefore I'm wondering, this digital development, for whom? (Caseworker 2)

Similarly, caseworkers often refer to an existing divide between, on the one hand, independent jobseekers who have access to the relevant resources required and, on the other, 'challenging' and 'unpredictable jobseekers' who are positioned far from the labour market. New digital tools provide opportunities for independent jobseekers; they no longer need to 'waste valuable time by entering the employment office and meeting a caseworker for bureaucratic reasons. All this can be done at a distance, via our high-class digital matching-direct tools, it offers total freedom for this group' (Caseworker 5). However, the challenging clients will have a more difficult time, as they 'lose their extra help and guidance, someone who can join clients when encountering employers' (Caseworker, observation). One caseworker even feared that such reduced personal interactions with clients would lead to anonymity and dehumanization in relation to the jobseekers (Lunchroom observation, May-17), something that might have negative consequences for vulnerable groups.

5.2.2 Reduction of Client Complexity

Many caseworkers feared they might not be needed any longer when clients started using digital matching-direct tools. They stressed that central PES management's implementation of digital client self-service did not consider the complexity of the work caseworkers needed to perform and the type of clients they encountered. Some caseworkers viewed the digitalized support systems for clients as a mockery of their professional reality, and an insult to their clients:

> I'm really sorry that my own agency doesn't understand how difficult the groups we actually need to deal with are. I attended a one-day staff meeting and half of the day was filled with flashy pictures and led lamps and our IT director said that 'next year, we will have new technology, you will have four apps on your mobile phone'. This is an insult to me that they haven't understood what I'm doing daily. Above all, this is a mockery of all those people, imagine if they were sitting here. Imagine if they [Managers] would have to meet those people. (Caseworker 26)

Besides feeling offended by the new web-based routines, the caseworker above reported that some clients cannot even take care of their personal hygiene; 'how on earth are they supposed to self-manage with this digital technology?' For these clients, personal relationships were seen as a necessity.

Relationship-building and client-caseworker bonding were often put forward in a positive manner; however, some caseworkers instead discussed different reasons for avoiding what was classified as the 'challenging' cases. In these situations, caseworkers showed a positive attitude towards the development of increased distance to jobseekers via scheduled visits and digital self-service. This was viewed as more convenient and predictable, because they did not need to face 'challenging' groups who confronted them with all sorts of questions in the 'Direct Support Service'.

Nevertheless, caseworkers' perceived conflict between the management ideal of standardized professional practice in their client interaction and their professional service ideal often caused fear and frustration; caseworkers feared that their professional role would become a more impersonal administrative function, which would turn into an interchangeable and needless function where a close relation to clients could be avoided (see *Breit* et al. 2020). Such reduction of complexity means fewer opportunities to include a holistic perspective when confronting and handling individuals' unemployment situations. In fact, caseworkers said that even clients with disabilities would need to act independently. These individuals, however, might be even more difficult to place in standardized 'boxes', as their needs require a relational approach that includes the 'whole person'. Therefore, many caseworkers questioned the specialization of caseworker activities associated with client self-support and digitalization, as shown below:

> They're trying to reorganize the handling of people with disabilities into different boxes. One [caseworker] works with them when they're participating in workplace training, one with those who want to get a qualification, one with those who need further investigation regarding their ability to work. A fourth one works with those who are in contact with other agencies. That's probably ok and we can choose. But I'm trying to tell my manager; it won't work this way. I don't work like that in my conversations. When I wrote 'How's it going with the workplace training? Well, we could give it a try over there. Did you say qualification? Well sorry, I'm not responsible for that. Well, let's see… Kalle, could you please come over and discuss qualification?' How's the person in question going to experience that? 'Yes, but the kids aren't doing well' 'ok, but I won't take care of that, this is a case for the special guidance counsellor.' Partly, it's about my way of working, this won't be fun at all. Well, maybe effective, but not fun, and it becomes dehumanized. A person can't be reduced to a workplace training for six months and a qualification for two [months]. (Caseworker 12)

The excerpt also exemplifies a client-oriented professional identity expressed among caseworkers (particularly the senior ones), where caseworkers pragmatically focus on values related to the external environment: the complexity of meeting jobseekers' and employers' needs (see also *Hollertz* et al. 2021; *Jacobsson* et al. 2020). The caseworkers' relational interactions with clients and potential employers are what makes them feel proud about and appreciate their work. One caseworker described how the PES is becoming more similar to other

Swedish welfare agencies, mentioning in particular the Social Insurance Agency (SIA) as a worst-case scenario, where centralization and anonymization have become important words:

> She describes how the PES is on its way to becoming like the SIA. Centralization and anonymity. The computer takes over. The computer takes care of the matching process. She says this is absurd. 'Match.com [*dating site*] hasn't come to the PES yet? Seems as if it's on the way'. In this case, the role of the caseworker is to document and administrate. Control. It's up to the individual to take care of herself. They won't get help and support from the caseworker. The new PES reorganization reduces the direct client meetings and personal contacts. Negative. Local branches are closed. (Customer centre, field notes May 17, 2017).

During this observation, the caseworker described how important personal encounters with clients outside office hours are, e. g., when they approached her and showed their appreciation, and she realized how important she was for them, emphasizing the importance of meeting clients face-to-face. Thus, job satisfaction and meaningfulness in work come primarily from personal encounters, commitment and interaction with jobseekers; personal encounters are often stressed as being important for clients – though indirectly also for caseworkers themselves.

6. Discussion

When comparing managers' and caseworkers' perceptions of the Swedish PES organizational reform initiated in 2014, with increased emphasis on digital self-service for clients, two different views of the client were put forward: the vulnerable versus the competent subject. Caseworkers viewed clients as vulnerable subjects in need of personalized guidance, interaction and support, whereas managers viewed them as competent subjects ready to take charge of their own unemployment situations. Personal, face-to-face client contact was often stressed by caseworkers as an important emotional reward of work, but also a precondition for supporting people far from the labour market. On the contrary, managers experienced increased digitalized self-service as an obvious development based on assumed demands from the customers and their needs. Caseworkers' and local managers' divergent views of the client and the caseworker-role are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Perceptions of Clients and Digital Self-Service

	Caseworkers	*Local Managers*
View of the client	The vulnerable subject.	The competent subject.
The caseworker-role	A holistic view of the client requiring personal contact and guidance.	Providing equal treatment via standardized service solutions.

Source: own depiction.

Our study indicates that there are strong emphasises and expectations on both clients and caseworkers to change and adapt themselves to the organizational changes when introducing digital self-services in a welfare state bureaucracy. Through digital self-services with reduced personal support, jobseekers are required to take charge of their 'own' unemployment process and have responsibility for tasks that were previously managed by the caseworkers. The dislocation of responsibility via digital self-services serves to reinforce responsibilization, thus turning the client into her own caseworker. Our findings confirm previous research, namely that welfare state bureaucracies such as employment services have transformed into customer-oriented service providers, where frontline professionals' main tasks are to guide, motivate and control jobseekers (*Korczynski*/*Bishop* 2008; *Penz* et al. 2017), e. g., via advanced digital platforms (*Breit* et al. 2020). Thus, social responsibility has shifted from society to the individual; from the right to employment to the obligation to be employable (*Garsten*/*Jacobsson* 2004). Such a dislocation of responsibility in Swedish labour market policy, through the digital service for clients, involves changes in the function of the welfare state (*Fotaki* 2011; *Gilliatt* et al. 2000; *Newman*/*Clarke* 2009), particularly when considering the frontline workers' role and their interactions with jobseekers.

From a client perspective, the changes in welfare state bureaucracies and the professional role of caseworkers may have major consequences for vulnerable groups of job-seekers, such as 'non-digital' clients and people with little previous labour market outcomes; groups that will be left behind in the upcoming 'digital divide' (*Breit*/*Salomon* 2015, S. 301). Therefore, vulnerable groups with a high threshold into employment risk a prolonged period of unemployment (see IFAU 2019, S. 27, also Statskontoret 2019, S. 80). Jobseekers are not only expected to handle digital sources independently, they are also supposed to be familiar with different labour market measures available for (re-)entering employment seen that they will need to administer their own case. Thus, the process of responsibilization that turns jobseekers into their own caseworker may reinforce a divide between: 1) the autonomous digital jobseekers who will expe-

rience an increase in freedom and reduction in bureaucratic procedures in their job search (local managers' perception) and 2) the vulnerable, dependent clients who will face increased obstacles and difficulties on their road to employment (caseworkers' perception). Meanwhile, the PES agency's governmental assignment is to be accessible for *all* jobseekers, no matter how capable they are in handling digital resources autonomously. Digital self-services with reduced personal involvement from caseworkers will most likely further increase the distance between the welfare state and the citizens (see also *Nord* 2017). In fact, the identified need for caseworkers in physical offices, which clients can visit and where they in person can receive personal and individualized service, risks being downgraded (a development observed since 2019, see ST 2020). With the client contact being automated, the caseworkers' role as employment officer risk to become superfluous.

As shown, the technical development also implies changes in the professional role of caseworkers since their working tasks are becoming 'outsourced' (*Breit* et al. 2020) to clients themselves. The analysis reveals that there is a strong organisational pressure on caseworkers (from local managers) to embrace introduced changes and take on a more withdrawn and unpersonal role to clients. However, caseworkers express strong resistance to proposed changes. The findings might thus have practical relevance for agency workers seen that the organizational context matters differently for different professional groups (cf. *Evans* 2016); local managers focus more on organizational output and resource efficiency (along with the policy directives/the organizational reform) while caseworkers emphasize external client-related outcomes (see *Jacobsson*/*Wallinder*/*Seing* 2020). Both groups put forward that the new organization under implementation, including digital self-services for clients, implies that a new caseworker-role will emerge. The traditional PES-caseworker role is challenged since their working tasks are transformed, removed and/or replaced by both the new technology and the clients themselves. As shown in this study, caseworkers (especially the senior ones) expressed a fear that their role might become obsolete trough the digital development and organizational changes. The professional role might become redundant and the change resistance among the caseworkers which clearly emerges in our results, therefor becomes logical from a caseworker point of view (see also *Rønningstad* 2018). However, official reports/evaluations of the PES' organizational reform shows that the caseworkers today spend a lot of their working hours and resources on helping clients to handle the digital self-service such as registration and activity reporting (PES 2019). Thus, in a digitized employment service, the new caseworker role might mainly consist of supporting or even enforcing jobseekers to behave digitally (*Breit* et al. 2020), thereby encouraging jobseekers to self-governing through technology.

In sum, the digital changes might challenge the professional caseworker role seen that caseworkers will no longer have a direct and in-person relation at the frontline with clients. While managers support instructions from superiors, caseworkers position become a battleground for change-resistance in which the managers' logic most likely will dominate. This development could cause a 'noise reduction' (*Breit* et al. 2020), where frontline workers became more restrictive in their client responses which can cause a reduction of the perceived client complexity. Furthermore, our study raises questions about what will happen to the caseworker role in the PES regarding caseworkers' professional identity and feelings about their work role and the clients they meet. Our analysis suggests that the technological development towards automated digital self-service constitutes one further step towards a more distant relationship between clients and caseworkers, a relationship in which the responsibility for finding employment is increasingly transferred from caseworkers to the clients themselves. This development runs the risk of pushing marginalised vulnerable groups even further away from employment.

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