
Engaging employers in vocational rehabilitation: understanding the new significance of knowledge brokers

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: Policymakers have a growing interest in the role played by employers in promoting labour market participation for jobseekers with support needs. This is reflected in the development of demand-led approaches which adopt employers' hiring requirements as a starting point for labour market intervention.

OBJECTIVE: The article examines the work of job agents, who promote the matching of jobseekers and employers in a Norwegian demand-led approach called Ripples in the Water (RiW). The aim is to understand job agents' strategic and brokering work of employer engagement.

METHODS: Explorative, qualitative study based on interviews and field notes from formal and informal meetings with job agents, employers and jobseekers in RiW.

RESULTS: Job agents function as knowledge brokers who connect the discourses of welfare and market.

CONCLUSIONS: RiW represents one possible approach to increasing employer engagement in vocational rehabilitation. Job agents in RiW build relations with employers by reframing vocational rehabilitation.

Keywords

Employer engagement, job agents, knowledge brokering, vocational rehabilitation

Introduction

The last 20 years, Norway has adopted a number of policy reforms to reduce welfare dependency and increase the employment rate. Activation for people with support needs is high on the agenda, and a considerable number of people with health problems are enrolled in active labour market programmes (ALMPs)¹. One important change, forwarded by policy reforms, concerns the role of the employers in ALMPs (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2014-2015; 2012–2013; NOU 2012:6). Instead of considering participation in the open labour market only as the ultimate *goal* of activation, providing people with job experience in ordinary workplaces is now widely believed to be an important *means* of activation (Hernes, 2015). Since 2000, vocational training is increasingly taking place in ordinary workplaces rather than in sheltered enterprises (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2012–2013). However, despite attempts to make employers key players in ALMPs and a growing awareness that employer engagement is crucial to the success of ALMPs (e.g. Bredgaard & Halkjær, 2016; Ingold & Stuart, 2015; Ingold & Valizade, 2015; Bellis, Sigala & Dewson, 2011), Norwegian authorities are reluctant to impose obligations on employers (Halvorsen & Hvinden, 2011; Econ, 2006). Hence, employer engagement with ALMPs depends on voluntary commitments.

Notes

¹ By the end of November 2017, 57,337 people with reduced work capacity were enrolled in ALMPs (NAV, 2017a)

According to Ingold and Stuart (2015), employer engagement with ALMPs has two ‘faces’: one concerns the actions of employers and the other, the activities ALMPs undertake to engage employers. This article draws attention to the latter by examining the activities of ‘job agents²’ in their attempts to engage employers in participating in Ripples in the Water (RiW). RiW is a recruitment programme initiated by the main employers’ federation, the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, known as NHO in Norway. RiW seeks to enhance job participation for jobseekers with support needs. Job agents in vocational rehabilitation enterprises³ work as recruiters and as mediators between vocational rehabilitation enterprises and employers in the ordinary labour market. This in-between position provides one point of departure for describing and analysing the dynamics and forms of collaboration between the enterprises and employers. Because the government has few guidelines about how to engage employers, ALMPs tend to find their own way of doing this, which Ingold and Valizade (2017, p. 532) refer to as ‘black box’ strategies. In the context of RiW, the article suggests that these strategies can be understood in light of the job agents functioning as *translators* and *brokers* between vocational rehabilitation enterprises and the labour market. Taking the job agents’ experiences and their brokering strategies as a methodological point of entry, the article aims to understand the work of employer engagement. To achieve this, it draws on Dorothy Smith’s (2005) notion of *discourse*, as a metaphor for what the job agents are brokering between.

The role of employers, or the ‘demand-side’ of ALMP interventions, is given little attention in the scholarly discussion on activation. Recently, however, some studies have focused on

²The job agents are called key account managers in RiW. ‘Job agent’ is used here because the term is more appropriate for describing their role.

³ Vocational rehabilitation enterprises organize ALMPs.

employer involvement in ALMPs (Bredgaard & Halkjær, 2016; Swank & Martin, 2004; 2012; Martin, 2004; Ingold & Stuart, 2015; Ingold & Valizade, 2017; van Berkel & van der Aa, 2014). These studies examine institutional, organizational and contextual factors that affect employers' likelihood of participating in ALMPs as well as their roles, viewpoints and needs in engaging in ALMPs. This article continues this emerging scholarly conversation about employer involvement, with a focus on vocational rehabilitation professionals' roles and relational aspects of employer engagement. Methodologically, this involves paying in-depth attention to what job agents say and do to engage employers, on how they reflect on their practices, and, not least, on how specific collaborations unfold. This practice-near intention relates the article to the workplace-oriented branch of vocational rehabilitation literature. Here, the need to develop cooperative and effective relationships with employers has been discussed for many years (Gilbride & Stensrud, 2008, 1999; Buys & Rennie, 2001; Gilbride, 2000; Jenkins & Strauser, 1999; Fry, 1997; Fabian, Luecking & Tilson, 1994; Vandergoot, 1987). A recurring issue in this literature has been how vocational rehabilitation professionals can expand their counselling work to encompass employers, how they can build long-lasting trust, how they can frame themselves as resources towards employers and how they can work to make connections between employers and disadvantaged jobseekers. According to Gilbride and Stensrud (2008), a key to making these connections is the vocational rehabilitation professionals' abilities to act as brokers and intermediators. Also Supported Employment (SE) studies on job specialists' roles and competence towards employers are relevant in this article (e.g. Lexén, Emmelin & Bejerholm, 2016; Gustafsson, Peralta & Danermark, 2013). Like the job agents, job specialists in SE programmes function as 'match-makers between supply and demand' (European Commission, 2011, p. 11). This requires competence and skills in individualized and empathetic support of jobseekers *and* competence in systematically

building relationships with employers (e.g. Glover & Frounfelker, 2011; Whitley, Kostick & Bush, 2010).

In the following the theoretical perspectives informing the analysis are discussed. After presenting the key elements of RiW and situating the project in an empirical context, the study design and data gathering is described. The main part of the article provides empirical descriptions of the job agents' strategies for employer engagement. Then follows a discussion of how the job agents use language, communication styles and methods associated with two discourses as resources to create a new way of doing vocation rehabilitation.

Theoretical perspectives

Using an institutional ethnographic approach this article investigates how vocational rehabilitation is done at the nexus between welfare services and the labour market. It focuses on how job agents' activities are coordinated within a 'welfare discourse' and a 'market discourse'. The institutional ethnographic approach is especially appropriate for discovering how discourses organize people's activities and make certain types of language and practices more legitimate than others (Smith, 2005). As McCoy (2006) points out, the concept of discourse encompasses 'work', 'language' and 'ruling relations'. These aspects of discourse are highly relevant in the empirical analytical sections of the article, as they can provide important insights into what influences job agents' efforts to engage employers.

Smith (1988; 2005) draws on Michel Foucault's (1970) conceptualisation of discourse in that she aims to show how power and governing (macro level) regulate people's local practices (micro level). Both Foucault and Smith are concerned with how individuals participate in and

reproduce particular discourses. However, the two scholar's theorization has significant differences that influence empirical research (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 44). Whereas Foucault's discourse analysis starts with the *discourse itself* and provides 'a pure description of discursive events' (1972, p. 27), the starting point in an institutional ethnography is in people's activities in a local setting, or the '*discourses in action*' (Smith, 2005, p. 127). The differences derive (among other things) from Foucault and Smith's divergent viewpoints on 'the subject'. For Foucault, the subject is a discursive construction (Satka & Skehill, 2011, p. 198). For Smith, people are active subjects who can resist and even change discourses because they will always have experiences that a given 'discourse will not speak' (2005, p. 18). Thus, Smith (2005, p. 127) brings attention to the fluidity and continual remaking of discourses. Herein lies the main reason for using Smith's theorization of discourse. The job agents' personal experiences and their everyday activities are starting points for my attention to discourses, and Smith offers methodological and analytical tools 'to put personal experience into the centre of a trustworthy analysis' (Campbell, 2006, p. 92).

In the job agents' accounts, two distinctive ways of talking and acting in terms of employer engagement were identified: a 'welfare discourse' and a 'market discourse'. Welfare discourse refers to the job agents' knowledge about traditional social work expressed in their talk about jobseekers' resources and limitations as well as in their individualized and holistic approach to vocational rehabilitation. All the job agents had worked as counsellors⁴ and some of them were still part-time counsellors. Furthermore, the welfare discourse also encompasses the job agents' knowledge about the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration's regulations and policy instruments. Market discourse, in contrast, refers to the language and

⁴ Counsellors are activation workers employed in vocational rehabilitation enterprises.

methods of business and bottom-line logic. Job agents perceived employers as a highly heterogeneous group, but knew that employers primarily have to take care of their own production needs. Therefore, in order to recruit and retain employers in RiW, job agents considered it necessary to adapt to employers' own terms and ways of thinking.

A core question in institutional ethnography is how the local activities of people at specific times and specific places are organized to happen in the way they do. Behind this question lies the main theoretical assumption of institutional ethnography, that society is organized by ruling relations (Rankin & Campbell, 2006, pp. 186–187). Smith (1999, p. 49) defines ruling relations as 'the complex of administrative, managerial, professional and discursive organization that regulates, organizes, governs, and otherwise controls our societies'. Ruling relations surround people's daily lives, but can be hard to identify as they are often taken for granted. In the context of RiW, the welfare discourse and the market discourse are central dimensions of the ruling relations. What primarily governed the job agents' practices was their position in-between employers and vocational rehabilitation enterprises. To succeed, job agents had to overcome the inherent differences between the discourses and speak and act in ways that encompassed both. This double loyalty, I argue, seemed to permeate everything they did.

The welfare/market dichotomy does not refer to actual separate worlds. Quite the opposite; vocational rehabilitation professionals and employers have always cooperated, and their interests, values and knowledge cannot be reduced to belong to only one of the discourses. Yet, the dichotomy is used here because the discourses were deeply integrated and taken for granted in the job agents' practices. In addition, the dichotomy is 'good to think with' (Lévi-

Strauss, 1962) in the sense that it pinpoints what the job agents were actually brokering between. It captures and explains what job agent Tina characterized as ‘our doubleness between selling and human compassion’. The discourses can also shed light on what is new with RiW.

Institutional ethnographers are committed to staying close to people’s concrete and material practices (Bisaillon, 2012, p. 610). The aim is to ‘open up’ the site of investigation instead of ‘closing’ it through an extensive use of abstractions, conceptualizations and theories (e.g. Smith, 2005). In adhering to this empirical approach during data collection and analysis, the concern was on ensuring that no theories were imposed on the data. However, as my insights into the job agents’ practices became clearer, the more valuable it seemed to interpret them as translation and brokering strategies. In literature on knowledge brokering (Schlierf & Meyer, 2013; Meyer, 2010; Bielak, Campbell, Pope, Schaefer & Shaxon, 2008) I found analytical resources that could contribute to explaining why and how job agents’ efforts to engage employers take a particular shape. Moreover, treating the job agents as knowledge brokers creates links to people in similar roles ‘at the intersection of worlds’ (Meyer, 2010, p. 120). The perspective of knowledge brokering supplements the institutional ethnographic approach as it allows for conceptualizing practices that institutional ethnography opened up.

The term ‘knowledge brokering’ was introduced in the late 1990s and is increasingly being applied within fields like science, health, innovation, management and policy (Meyer, 2010). Wenger (1998, p. 109) understands brokering as ‘involving processes of translation, coordination, and alignment between perspectives’ and ‘linking practices by facilitating transactions between them’. Thus, knowledge brokers do not move knowledge in a passive,

straightforward manner, but actively create and shape a new kind of knowledge: brokered knowledge (Meyer, 2010). This involves creating a ‘common language’ (Meyer, 2010) in which social worlds can engage with each other. Within the field of vocational rehabilitation, brokering is forwarded as part of a necessary employment strategy where vocational rehabilitation professionals must work to bridge the gap between disadvantaged jobseekers, who have limited social labour market capital, and employers, who are unaware of this group of jobseekers as potential employees (Gilbride & Stensrud, 2008; Potts, 2005). The brokers know both parties, bring them together and promote reciprocity (Gilbride & Stensrud, 2008, p. 126). In this article, the concept of knowledge brokering contributes to understanding job agents’ practices of connecting employers and vocational rehabilitation programmes. This can reveal how employers’ involvement in ALMPs affects the discursive framing of vocational rehabilitation.

Context, case and methods

In Norway, employers are key social partners in the development of employment policy (e.g. Dølvik, 2013; Hernes, 2006). In 2001, the government (the Minister of Labour), the employer organizations and the labour unions signed the Cooperation Agreement on a More Inclusive Working Life (the IA Agreement). The main objective was formulated in three secondary goals: (1) to prevent and reduce sick leave, (2) to prevent withdrawal and increase employment of people with impaired functional ability and (3) to increase the average labour force participation rate for people over the age of 50 (NAV, 2014). Since the IA Agreement came into effect, it has been renewed four times, and covers about 60 per cent of all employees and 26 per cent of all enterprises (Ose et al., 2013).

This forms the contextual backdrop to why NHO launched RiW in 2012. As Tøssebro, Wik and Molden explain (2017, p. 13), RiW is a response to (1) the increased emphasis on employers' roles in promoting labour market inclusion for disadvantaged groups and (2) the secondary goal 2 of the IA Agreement⁵. The core idea of RiW is to provide comprehensive collaboration between vocational rehabilitation enterprises and private enterprises, both of which are members of NHO. Three main elements separate RiW from 'traditional' vocational rehabilitation (Braathen & Lien, 2015). RiW (1) starts with a 'needs assessment' of the place of employment to ensure that each recruitment process meets employers' needs; (2) has an organizational framework designed to improve dialogue between vocational rehabilitation enterprises and employers and between the enterprises; (3) has a follow-up process for employers. These elements are meant to enhance the job match between employers and jobseekers ('candidates' in RiW)⁶, ensure proper support for them both and, ultimately, lead to successful recruitment. While work placements in vocational rehabilitation processes often function as a means for job training and assessing the jobseekers' work capacity (NAV, 2017b), work placements in RiW are more formalized, time-restricted and targeted. If both employer and candidate perceive the placement as successful, the candidate is supposed to be recruited. It is important to note that RiW is not a substitute for vocational rehabilitation programmes, but takes place on top of these because it targets the last stages of the transfer process from training to ordinary labour market participation⁷. There is considerable uncertainty regarding the exact number of people recruited through RiW, but it is estimated that approximately 600 people get into work through the initiative annually (Tøssebro et al., 2017). In their evaluation of RiW, Tøssebro and colleagues discuss possible expansion of

⁵ In practice, the target group is not only people with impaired functional abilities, but people with all forms of reduced work capacity (Tøssebro et al., 2017).

⁶ The article uses 'candidate' in talking about RiW and 'jobseeker' in a more general sense.

⁷ This article focuses primarily on job agents' activities and does not go into details about the RiW project.

RiW to involve enterprises that are not NHO members. This could promote employment for a wider group of people with support needs (Tøssebro et al., 2017).

The job agents implement RiW. Their main responsibilities include promoting RiW to employers; recruiting employers and coordinating their vacancies and recruitment needs; sharing information about vacancies internally (with counsellors) and externally (with job agents in the RiW network); interviewing and assessing potential candidates; and initiating and coordinating the recruitment processes. Counsellors provide the candidates with support, while the job agents are primarily responsible for following up employers throughout the recruitment processes⁸. However, because of their daily collaboration with counsellors and candidates, the job agent position is best understood as in-between the counsellors/ candidates on one side and employers on the other.

The data drawn on for this article, consists of 26 interview transcripts and field notes from 13 formal meetings and seminars as well as from a number of informal encounters. Inspired by institutional ethnography, data collection began by constructing a view into the field of vocational rehabilitation from the standpoint of the job agents. To learn about their knowledge and practices, I followed them through different sites of action, as an observer at formal and informal meetings and as a curious conversation partner at seminars and events, in their office, in the canteen, on the bus and so on. Lengthy conversation-like interviews explored their (often taken-for-granted) work knowledge and focused on understanding how they

⁸ This differentiates the job agents' responsibilities from those of job-specialists in Supported Employment programmes who follow-up both employers and jobseekers (e.g. European Commission, 2011; Spjelkavik, 2015, 2012).

coordinate their work with that of others. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with candidates and employers involved in RiW and with people working elsewhere in vocational rehabilitation. The information about these other positions displayed the complexity of the field and situated the job agents' work in a broader context. The fact that I met the same informants several times in different settings enabled me to ask follow-up questions and check my understandings throughout the data collection. Towards the end of the analysis, a focus group of job agents discussed the emergent findings. The discussion clarified and approved my analysis of the findings. In line with institutional ethnography, taking the standpoint of the job agents meant treating them as experts on what they do and having confidence in their understandings (e.g. Smith, 2005).

The job agent

The job agents had the overall responsibility for developing a new and streamlined strategy to involve employers in vocational rehabilitation on a larger scale. The everyday work of the job agents in doing this constantly changes, as the following excerpts from the field notes illustrate.

Relations, relations, relations. My work is all about relations. I have to be 'on', but not too much, it can sometimes be tricky to find this balance. I adjust myself to the demands of the employers, and try to judge how far I can push them.

I am sitting in Mike's office, spending a day with him to gain insight into his job as a job agent. Mike speaks quickly and vividly, constantly checks his e-mail and receives phone calls. I have asked him to plan for a normal workday, except that I will listen to his calls, hanging over his shoulder asking him questions when he writes mails.

‘Hi ... how are you doing? How was your summer? Great...I am calling just to check on how things are working out with the new candidate... Yes? Fantastic. You just contact me if something turns up, right?’ Mike is calling his contact at a waste-handling company, where a RiW candidate has just started a work placement. When he hangs up, he emphasizes the importance of showing the employers that you are readily available and of following up closely. Minutes later, a colleague, a counsellor, drops by to get more information about a possible work placement in a hotel, for a candidate she is following up. After talking about the candidate, (a young woman who suffers from mental illness), they agree to call the hotel. Because the counsellor is not comfortable with making the call herself, Mike makes it. ‘How do you know what to say to all these people in all these different sectors? Don’t you get nervous?’ I ask Mike afterwards. Mike laughs and pauses. Then he replies, ‘I am experienced, you know, I do this every day. And I guess it also has to do with personality; I love talking to people, creating relationships, and I am curious about things’.

When our meeting is over, Mike rushes off to meet the manager of a big hotel down town. On his way, he swings by a local kiosk to check the possibilities for collaboration.

All the job agents talked about their constantly changing roles. As Robert said, ‘My role changes from hour to hour dependent on who I am talking to. It’s like I am switching between several hats every day’. I operationalized these roles as strategies derived from the job agents’ knowledge about welfare and market discourses. My findings revealed that the job agents used three groups of strategies. One was *building relations*, the key to employer engagement, in which the job agents aimed to create lasting connections with employers and expand the field of vocational rehabilitation. The second was *negotiating*, through which job agents actively translated and sought alignment between different considerations and perspectives.

The third was *coaching*, where they taught and trained counsellors in their enterprise, giving them new insights, skills and techniques to improve their collaboration with and understanding of employers.

Building relations

The job agents characterized themselves as relationship builders, which primarily referred to their outreach activities to engage employers. I detected three stages of relationship building strategies in the job agents' accounts. In the first stage they were out in the community; in the second they provided follow-along support during job placements, and in the third they tried to keep existing relations warm during periods with no ongoing recruitment. Although the strategies in these stages differed, they all evoked associations to business.

In the first stage, job agents used multiple types of arguments, or sales pitches, to appeal to employers. Mathilde explained how she proceeds:

‘I never know exactly what to expect in the first meeting so I let the employers tell me as much as possible about their enterprise. As they talk, I decide on a sales pitch. Most frequently, I sell RiW as a safe recruitment strategy where the employers actually get to know and try out the candidates for a period. I present RiW as a win-win situation and focus solely on meeting the employers' needs. Sometimes I mention the importance of corporate social responsibility, the potential for getting loyal and eager-to-work employees or the possibility of supporting the struggle against social exclusion. But this depends on my impression of that particular employer’.

Mathilde decided on her sales pitch depending on how the meetings proceeded and how she interpreted the employers' views and intentions about engaging in RiW. Because she knew little about the employers' social engagement in the beginning of the meeting, she introduced

the ‘business argument’ – RiW as a safe, cheap and professional recruitment project. Unless the employers started talking about social responsibility, she let the ‘moral argument’ lie, or mentioned it as a mere bonus. In reflecting on her first meetings with employers, Tina’s expressed a similar strategy: ‘I can’t put constraints on employers. I’m always saying: “you are the one who sets the premises”. To go into this collaboration with a goal of changing the employers’ attitudes in no time, wouldn’t work’.

Mathilde’s account illustrates that she chose her sales pitch according to her reading of the employer. Whereas job agents debated sales pitch strategies at their regular meetings, how they actually applied them was highly situation-dependent and demanded what the job agents referred to as *‘fingerspitzgefühl’*. They described *fingerspitzgefühl* as a social competence that included their interpretation of individual employers as well as ways of approaching, talking and dressing to appeal to employers. This competence is important so the job agents ‘melt into’ employers’ habituated way of doing things. This is apparent in Maria’s answer to how she approached employers for the first time:

It boils down to how formal you think the staff at a specific workplace are. How are they dressed? How do they talk? Are they used to communicating by e-mail or orally? If they spend their workday on the floor and not in front of a computer, like in a bicycle workshop, it is more natural to meet up on the floor, casually dressed. If they work in an office, however, they most likely have a detailed schedule and find it irritating if you just show up. Then I rather call or e-mail them.

Maria’s ability to adapt herself to different workplaces originated in her extensive knowledge of diverse business sectors. Furthermore, Maria used what she interpreted as the rules of conduct in terms of developing close and trusting relationships with employers.

Mike's frequent phone calls to employers 'just to check on how things are working out' illustrate how important it is to Mike to show that he is easily accessible and following up closely. All job agents brought up accessibility as a sign of 'good service at any time'. Mike set up dates in his calendar several months ahead for contacting his cooperation partners. 'Frequency is crucial' he explained. 'Employers constantly have so much to do, so we need to remind them about us. Not only during recruitment processes, but always, with every employer we collaborate with. We must keep the relationship warm'. 'Employer care' (*bedriftspleie*) is a central concern in the second and the third stages of job agents' relationship building strategies. Helene characterized the focus on employer care as the biggest change in her workplace the last few years:

When I started here five years ago, the employer contact was dependent on the relationship between one particular counsellor and the employer he or she happened to collaborate with. All that had to do with employers was actually very random and non-formalized. When a counsellor stopped working here we lost all the counsellor's contacts! Fortunately, this would not have happened now. We have a totally different focus on caring for our relationship with employers.

Employer care is not limited to RiW, but can be seen in conjunction with an increased awareness within vocational rehabilitation that collaboration with employers requires attention to employers' situation and support needs (e.g. Tøssebro et al., 2017; Gilbride & Stensrud, 2008, 1999; Buys & Rennie, 2001). To reduce employers' sense of risk and negative expectations associated with recruiting people with support needs, the support system need to provide them extensive counselling and up-front assistance (Schafft & Spjelkavik, 2014). As Even pointed out, 'We have always cared for the candidates, but until a

few years ago we never spoke about employers' support needs. Some of our candidates have serious health problems. Of course the employers need to know we are here for them too'.

Job agents' descriptions of and comments on sales pitch and employer care reflected the fact that employers and vocational rehabilitation enterprises were not 'equal partners' in RiW, because the former possessed something that the latter needed: vacancies and job opportunities for their candidates. This shaped how job agents spoke and acted within RiW. Their response to this imbalance was *to act professionally*. Job agents were concerned with highlighting and marketing the competence and services of vocational rehabilitation enterprises in order to be perceived as equal partners. Tina explained: 'The aim is to increase our self-pride by agreeing on what we are good at and creating a way to express it. Then we can engage employers more easily'. Job agents expressed their professionalism in an extensive service-orientation towards employers and their business-like image building of vocational rehabilitation enterprises⁹. A central concern underlying the idea of professionalism was that employers were not supposed to be motivated to participate only by their 'kindness'. With slogans about RiW as 'win-win', 'sustainable recruitment' and 'a NHO membership benefit', the job agents branded RiW in a way that differentiated it from 'ordinary' ALMPs¹⁰.

⁹ Whitley and colleagues (2010, pp. 516–517) point to similar tendencies in the work of supported employment specialists.

¹⁰ Several studies have shown that participation in ALMPs have a negative effect on employers' hiring decisions (e.g. Hyggen, 2017; Liechti, Fossati, Bonoli, & Auer, 2017; Larsen & Vesan, 2011).

Negotiating

The job agents' efforts to build professional relations with employers demonstrated how they attempted to move the conversation between employers and vocational rehabilitation enterprises from one based on moral responsibility and kindness alone, to one also based on win-win and equal partnerships. In doing this, the job agents took the role of professional negotiators. As negotiators, they were concerned about demanding something back from employers. The following dialogue from the first meeting between Robert and an employer, a marketing manager in a hairdressing company, illustrates Robert's balancing give-and-take with the employer. He spoke clearly about what work placement through RiW might require from the employer. It is important to note, that before this conversation took place, the employer had shown great enthusiasm for RiW, making it easier for Robert to distinguish RiW from ordinary recruitment and to play out the welfare discourse.

Robert: We just had a very good recruitment process with X (another hairdressing company). But even though this process succeeded in the end, it was not a quick fix by any means. It demanded hard work for the candidate herself, for the employer and her colleagues, and for us. The candidate has severe social anxiety and had been several years outside work, almost isolated. It was a huge job to back her up and make her feel safe. So, it is important to emphasize that also employers must give something back and follow up closely.

Employer: Yes, definitely. We are willing to invest something in this, and to help ensure that the candidate gets a sense of empowerment during this process.

Robert: So, RiW is actually not 'free' because you as an employer must spend time and resources on following-up. In the beginning we don't know how much support a candidate needs. But they might demand more support than your other employees.

Employer: We're not supposed to take advantage of this, to ensure free labour or something. The problem now is that we don't exactly know what we need and the percentage of this vacancy is quite unclear. It depends on the candidate's capacity as well, how this vacancy develops.

Robert: Of course. We will see how things develop. And when the work placement starts, we'll have regular update meetings. But it is important for me to stress that RiW is a recruitment strategy and not just a job training programme. Recruitment has to be the goal.

Robert interpreted this employer as wanting to partake in RiW for social engagement reasons. This gave him an opening for emphasizing both the need for closely following up the candidates (which, in other cases, had been under-communicated) and the recruitment goal.

All the job agents remarked that it is more professional and more saleable to negotiate with employers than to treat them as mere costumers¹¹. When asked how they gained the employers' confidence and respect, the job agents pointed to the importance of appearing knowledgeable, demonstrating the uniqueness of their product (RiW) and showing that the candidates' labour should not be wasted. Because it is both obvious and natural for employers to take advantage of free labour, it was the job agents' responsibility as third-party negotiators to prevent this. As Helene put it:

Wasting vulnerable jobseekers' labour is widespread and well-known, and has been going on for years. Employers have lost respect for vocational rehabilitation

¹¹ Besides paying attention to the need for close follow-up of the candidates, the job agents could negotiate with employers about flexibility in working hours, the opportunity to take breaks, reasonable accommodation at the workplace, exemptions from certain work tasks and so on.

programmes because of their lack of firmness and ability to negotiate. In RiW we don't waste people's labour, even if the work capacity is considered to be only 20 per cent.

This quote demonstrates how Helene connected business arguments with respect for the candidates. Negotiation was perceived as a principal component for increasing the value of vocational rehabilitation. This means making significant changes in the communication and wrapping of the product, but not necessarily in the product itself. The job agents used words and terms other than what are normally applied within a social work framework because they believed that clothing RiW in a language of professionalism and business would benefit the success of the project and of the individual candidate. The term 'candidate' creates associations with a more active and capable jobseeker than 'client' and 'participant' do, terms used more frequently within vocational rehabilitation. Instead of describing them as having 'reduced work capacity', the candidates have 'holes in their CV', a phrase that normalises the reasons for unemployment and downplays the work barriers.

The job agents negotiated between the welfare discourse and the market discourse to inform the employers about what it sometimes takes to follow up a vulnerable candidate. They sought to expand the employers' understanding of vocational rehabilitation in a language that put them on 'the right wave-length for the employer to pick up on' (Waterhouse, Kimberley, Pam & Glover, 2010, p. 31). Managing the tricky balance between selling and working with vulnerable people, demands knowledge about what is at stake for candidates and employers and an ability to unite these different considerations in a manner that creates trust. Moreover, the job agents also had to carefully manage their relations with their colleagues and make sure that their work forms also resonated with those of the counsellors.

Coaching

Most counsellors (in the RiW enterprises) are educated within health, social work, pedagogics and psychology (Qvortrup, 2014). Hence, their competence is often described in terms of relational skills, communication skills and people-handling skills (Hagelund, 2016). The job agents saw counsellors as possessing a valuable competence that needed to be supplemented with market knowledge, and communicated in a new way. This is reflected in Robert's description on what distinguishes the counsellors' competence from his own:

Most counsellors have this 'inclusion-focus': the way of talking, the approach, the understanding, you know... They are good at the 'individual' part and the 'process' part. My role is to teach them how to involve employers, what is important to have in mind when they contact them, how they talk with them. Many counsellors have never worked in the business sector. They don't know how it works and what's going on out there.

Also in research literature on vocational rehabilitation competence, it is argued that counsellors need to develop broader and more horizontal approaches to communicate effectively with employers (Gilbride & Stensrud 2008, 1999; Jenkins & Strauser, 1999). Indeed, all the job agents criticized what they called 'traditional' vocational rehabilitation for being too focused on health and care, at the expense of work and opportunities. This, they claimed, contributed to ineffective and aimless job training processes. The job agents' overall ambitions for their enterprises were to more clearly articulate the accumulated competence of the staff (to make it more visible and 'saleable') and to add new insights and techniques to streamline and improve their relationships with employers. Even recounted:

RiW is based on techniques we already know. What's new is the standardizing and formalizing. Things need to be more predictable. We must deliver similar CV templates and provide the same follow-up of employers. We must also have confidence in each other, and make sure all of us deliver the same good quality. If not, the relationship and the trust we build with employers will demolish.

The job agents aimed to rearticulate and reframe counselling work by 'moving' counsellors' expertise from their offices to the work places, and by increasing counsellors' knowledge of employers and the labour market. This type of knowledge was referred to as 'market knowledge'. In practice, teaching the counsellors market knowledge involved introducing them to conceptual tools for addressing employers. These tools were expressions, jargon and communication practices that were intended to make counsellors appear more professional. Furthermore, by teaching the counsellors market knowledge, job agents aimed to demystify the business sector's image as 'a gang of well-dressed business leaders', as Helene humorously put it. Helene frequently arranged internal workshops in market knowledge for the counsellors. She believed the barriers some counsellors felt about contacting and talking with employers had to do with a lack of knowledge about employers' needs and viewpoints and a lack of training on employer communication. Her workshop was intended to address some of these shortcomings and eventually alter the counsellors' insecurities and potential prejudices against employers.

Discussion and conclusion

This article demonstrates how job agents in RiW function as knowledge brokers in vocational rehabilitation. According to Bielak (2013), knowledge brokers have to be able to see and think about the 'big picture'. They must understand the linkages between disciplines and be able to work horizontally. Job agents use these skills when they develop relations with and

negotiate with employer, advise candidates, and arrange workshops and coach their colleagues. All these practices are part of bridging the gap between vocational rehabilitation enterprises and employers. Nevertheless, job agents' manoeuvring between vocational rehabilitation anchored in social work and the business sector is not just a matter of transferring knowledge. Something changes in this process of aligning values and practices. As pointed out by Law (2002, p. 99), translation involves both retaining something and betraying something.

In their work on the border between discourses, job agents try to be loyal to and connected with business leaders, candidates and their own colleagues. As a response to a potentially conflicted position, they draw on knowledge and resources from both discourses and bring them together to create a new and unifying discourse of shared understanding and engagement. This is particularly visible when they create composite expressions like 'socially founded recruitment', 'sustainable recruitment' and 'labour market inclusion on enterprises' terms'. Job agents' brokered knowledge can be seen as resulting from social processes of reproducing, transforming and unifying the welfare discourse and the market discourse. Following Smith (1987, p. 61), discourses develop as a process of organization and reorganization of relations among participants. In the context of employer engagement, existing practices and communication forms in vocational rehabilitation enterprises change in response to employers' increasing participation. Job agents' efforts to speak in a language that 'resonate[s] more effectively with employers' (Waterhouse et al., 2010, p. 31) contribute to this discursive change.

RiW is a demand-led strategy developed partly as a reaction to ALMPs' inability to address employers' needs in labour market interventions. As Gore (200, p. 346) points out, demand-led approaches involve a substantial change in value systems and mode of operation for intermediary organizations. Furthermore, both Gore (2005) and Fletcher (2004) point to the potential paradox that demand-led approaches risk being more about meeting employers' hiring requirements than challenging labour-market inequalities. In the job agents' strategies of employer engagement, the business perspective tends to trump the conventional ways of knowing and acting within the welfare discourse. Clues of this domination are particularly visible in the job agents' extensive use of terms and methods associated with the business sector. However, although job agents' strategies point towards a more stylized and 'business-inspired' vocational rehabilitation, their brokering work also shows clear signs of attempts to increase employer awareness and responsibilities for jobseekers with support needs. As Mike enthusiastically proclaims, 'Some of the employers in RiW becomes better at inclusion work than we are. It's all about giving them more and more responsibility over time'. Statements like this indicate that projects like RiW can function as a social process of increasing employers' 'inclusion skills competence' (Spjelkavik, 2012).

Moreover, the job agents do not problematize the relationship between jobseekers' needs and employers' needs because their aim of promoting a job match necessarily takes both aspects into account. Their unifying language indicates that they see the two discourses as being flexible and challengeable more than as ruling and delimiting. In line with Smith, the discourses shape their actions and create opportunities and potential for individual agency. By using their 'two-world repertoire' (Schlierf & Meyer, 2013) in a creative way, job agents both adapt to the circumstances (reproduce the discourses) and influence them (transform the discourses). As such, I argue, they break ground for a new discourse of vocational

rehabilitation where the resources and needs of both jobseekers and employers are taken into consideration.

Gilbride and Stensrud (2008) argue that vocational rehabilitation professionals must act as effective system mediators and brokers to bridge the gap between employers and disadvantaged jobseekers. To involve employers, one must start by bringing them solutions instead of problems, the authors claim (2008, p. 129). This article shows that the job agents' work responds to these recommendations. As boundary-crossing knowledge brokers, the job agents function as creative problem solvers who build relations with employers by reframing vocational rehabilitation.

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