ORIGINAL ARTICLE

WILEY

From "what works" to "making it work": A practice perspective on evidence-based standardization in frontline service organizations

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Abstract

Evidence-based standards are becoming increasingly influential in frontline services connected to labor market inclusion of vulnerable citizens. To increase our understanding of standardization in such public service delivery, this study draws on interviews and ethnographic fieldwork from two frontline offices in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (2017–2018) that use the evidence-based Individual Placement and Support (IPS) standard. Adopting a theoretical perspective of organizational practices, the study highlights two distinct approaches to practicing IPS in the frontline organizations: as a "practice shift" in one organization (i.e., creating and legitimizing radically new service practices involving closer collaboration with employers) and as a "practice revival" in the other (i.e., reinstating more traditional service practices involving a holistic client orientation). Each approach relates to a specific constellation of recruitment practices, dynamics between frontline supervisors and staff, and team integration. The study contributes to the literature in two ways. First, it shows the underlying flexibility embedded in standardization and how standards may be implemented and adapted in ways that may either promote more radical change or revive traditional practices.

Second, it nuances positions in the literature on the impact of standards on professional service work. On this basis, the study suggests broadening the attention in research on evidence-based standards in public service delivery from discussions of "what works" to understanding the broader organizational dynamics involved in "making it work."

1 | INTRODUCTION

Driven by the "what works" agenda that spans across policy fields, frontline social services are increasingly being standardized to promote efficiency, transparency, legitimacy, quality, and accountability (Boaz et al., 2019; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). Standards are typically explicit, written, formalized, and connected to the norms of a practice (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000). Many evidence-based standards, such as guidelines, programs, evidence-based practice (EBP), assessment tools, and interventions, are intended to support frontline decision-making and promote welfare ideals, like service individualization, user involvement, and improved inter-organizational collaboration (Ponnert & Svensson, 2016).

The literature focuses extensively on the challenges of implementing evidence-based standards in frontline service delivery and professional work (Bergmark et al., 2018; Gray et al., 2009; Høybye-Mortensen, 2013; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Skillmark & Oscarsson, 2020; White et al., 2008). A related debate concerns whether standards should be implemented with high fidelity or be adapted to local needs (Damschroder et al., 2009; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). However, a challenge with standardization is that standards do not exist in isolation but are introduced within institutionalized organizational settings—contexts that are "already populated by practices, tools, people and other standards" (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010, p. 79). Hence, implementing and using standardized services in local organizational contexts entails challenges and dilemmas of adapting the standard to local needs *as well as* adapting the local organizations to suit the standard.

This article aims to add to these debates by exploring the consequences that standards may have for the organizational contexts in which they are used in everyday work (Schatzki et al., 2001; Timmermans & Berg, 2003). As such, the article focuses on the standardization of labor market inclusion services involving a range of institutionalized forms of work to "activate" (e.g., motivate, compel, assist, broker, and negotiate) citizens to improve their likelihood of entering the labor market (Andreassen, 2019; Berkel & Aa, 2012). Importantly, these types of services are difficult to standardize because of the inherent heterogeneity of clients and their service needs.

Specifically, the article explores how evidence-based standards are "made to work" by frontline workers and managers in everyday service provision. For this purpose, the study draws on a perspective of organizational practices centered on everyday work activities and understandings (Schatzki et al., 2001; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). The study is based on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews conducted from 2017 to 2018 in two frontline offices of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV). Both offices have implemented the evidence-based standard individual placement and support (Drake et al., 2012), which has become an increasingly popular means of standardizing activation services in NAV.

2 | EVIDENCE-BASED STANDARDIZATION AND FRONTLINE PRACTICES

Standardization is central in frontline service organizations that deliver services to people with heterogeneous and complex needs (Brodkin & Marston, 2013; Hasenfeld, 2010). For example, standards allow for classifying and

categorizing clients according to their needs (e.g., with assessment tools). They also enable frontline workers to follow guidelines and procedures in their follow-up work, and since the standards are approved by authorities, this ensures a certain level of accountability for the services.

While different types of standards exist (including design standards, terminological standards and performance standards; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010), this study focuses on procedural standards, which specify the steps practitioners should take when carrying out their work (Timmermans & Berg, 2003). Standards may be more or less detailed, vary in scope, and focus on individual practitioners or cooperation between actors (Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). In accordance with the embedded research model of EBP (Nutley et al., 2009), standards are chosen by central authorities and implemented across local services. Thus, research knowledge enters frontline practice as it is "embedded in systems, processes, and standards" (Nutley et al., 2009, p. 555). Even so, a well-known challenge is that the standards may conflict with institutionalized professionalism and professional autonomy in the service contexts in which they are implemented.

The literature on standardization in public service delivery emphasizes standards and whether they strengthen or weaken professional work. Some authors have portrayed standards as mainly top-down managerial tools that restrict discretionary decision-making, override situated attention to complex client needs, and disregard ethical considerations in pursuit of performance, efficiency, and effectiveness (Gray et al., 2009; Petersén & Olsson, 2014; White et al., 2008). Others have argued that standards increase scientific legitimacy (Barfoed & Jacobsson, 2012), strengthen professionals' ability to solve (complex) work tasks (Skillmark et al., 2019), and promote empowerment, user involvement, and resource-oriented services (Natland & Malmberg-Heimonen, 2016). Authors have also uncovered that professionals use discretion to alter and modify standards (Sletten & Bjørkquist, 2020). Therefore, standards can impact the local context in various ways (Høybye-Mortensen, 2013), either positively (e.g., increased equity, consistency, and effectiveness) or negatively (e.g., increased paperwork burden; Robinson, 2003).

A related debate focuses on the implementation of EBP and whether programs should be implemented with high fidelity (i.e., the degree of faithful replication of the originally intended program) or whether local adaptation should be allowed (or encouraged). From the view of achieving fidelity, adaptation is often regarded as an implementation failure that will negatively affect service outcomes. For example, Bond and Drake (2019), Corbière et al. (2010), and Bonfils et al. (2017) argued that the IPS standard should preferably be implemented with high fidelity. In contrast, implementation frameworks proposed by Durlak and DuPre (2008) and Damschroder et al. (2009) emphasize the value of adaptation. When local actors adapt a program, it can result in better implementation, because they are knowledgeable and able to adjust an intervention to enhance its effectiveness in the given context.

This study aims to shift attention toward the relationship between evidence-based standards and the *organizational context* of professional work. Some studies have shown the importance of organizational-level factors, which can contribute to a potentially dysfunctional (or lacking) impact of standardization. For example, the literature on street-level bureaucracy highlights organizational factors such as resource limitations, policy directives, program content, and governance mode (e.g., new public management [NPM]; Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016). Skillmark and Oscarsson (2020) identified organizational factors that explained increasing deviance from a standard over time. These included lack of leadership, weak competency development, and lack of reflection arenas. In a study on frontline practitioners who deviated from standardized tools, Sletten and Bjørkquist (2020) highlighted the role of managers, who supported discretionary modification of the standard because of shared professional commitments.

Studies focusing on the organizational context have also shown the different influences that standardization can have on different groups of workers within the same organization. For example, Bosk (2019) found that workers' social status may impact their use of standards; workers with higher social status subverted the standard, while workers with lower status followed the rules. Other studies have highlighted the decoupling of the standard and actual practices in organizations (Sandholtz, 2012). Nordesjö (2020) observed that actors at different levels in an organization framed the standard in two different ways: actors at the department level emphasized conformity to the standard and outward legitimacy, while actors at the unit level framed the standard as supportive of professional perspectives and needs. The loose coupling of these framings emphasized how standards are tweaked and framed to serve different interests and needs.

These studies provide important insights into the significance of standards in frontline service delivery and professional work. However, they downplay the *interplay* between the organizational context and frontline work. Therefore, little is known not only about how the standards are used but also about how the organizations themselves change and differ as a result of standardization. Furthermore, while most studies have focused on established (semi) professions, such as social workers, few have examined standardization of frontline practices by workers with more heterogeneous professional backgrounds, such as activation workers. Moreover, previous studies have mainly focused on practitioners who perform routine case-processing tasks (e.g., use of standardizing assessment tools). Few have explored standardization of work involving boundary-spanning, inter-organizational, and entrepreneurial roles, such as employment specialists (Ingold, 2018). Therefore, to complement the existing research, this study offers an in-depth analysis of frontline activation work practices within a specific evidence-based standard that was implemented in two frontline service organizations.

3 | A PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE

This study adopts a practice perspective, focusing on the everyday work of organizational actors (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). This perspective involves an empirical focus on people's actions in organizational settings and a theoretical focus on the mutually constitutive relationship between structures in organizational life and people's actions (Feldman & Orlikowski, 2011). In this study, the practice perspective allows for examining the standard's implementation in situated, everyday practice.

Practices are patterns of activities and actions that repeat over time in local, situated contexts (Nicolini, 2013) and can be defined as "organized human activities" (Schatzki, 2005, p. 471). These activities are made coherent by a common purpose, rules, and shared meaning (Schatzki, 2005; Smets et al., 2012). The main level of analysis is located above individuals and below the organizational level, focusing on work-level actions. This perspective also involves studying the "shared practical understandings" (Schatzki et al., 2001, p. 2) that individuals reproduce and modify.

Furthermore, the practice perspective acknowledges the roles of individual agency, initiative, and creativity (e.g., to modify and reinvent practices) while also situating agency within institutional and organizational structures (Nicolini, 2013). It focuses on the practical-evaluative dimension of agency, conceptualizing how actors get things done in everyday activities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In their situated, here-and-now practices, actors draw on habits, routines, emotions, and knowledge to make choices and confront challenges (Orlikowski, 2002). This knowledge includes professional knowledge (from training and formalized expertise) as well as experiential, tacit, and common-sense forms of knowledge (e.g., lay "everyday" knowledge and shared societal values; Harrits, 2016). Therefore, at the individual level, evidence-based standards interact with and possibly challenge frontline workers and managers' efforts to structure and perform work tasks.

At the organizational level, standards can be powerful tools for organizational change by "challenging and altering institutionalized behaviour and identities" (Brunsson et al., 2012, p. 620). However, how the standards are implemented is a central factor influencing the outcome of standardization, in addition to the actual content of the standard (Timmermans & Berg, 2003). Managers and first-line supervisors are central actors in standard implementation (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Sandholtz, 2012). They work purposefully to influence frontline workers to practice in accordance with the standard. However, the rules of the standard are applied and enacted in emergent situations, thus requiring both managers and frontline workers to do reflexive and interpretive work. Furthermore, standards are introduced in the context of other institutionalized—and potentially differing—ways of ordering and performing services. This can create conflict between new and old configurations, thereby increasing the need for managers (and frontline workers) to navigate and resolve these tensions.

This navigation generates the dynamic between standards, frontline workers' adherence to them, and the organizational context. This study adopts the practice perspective to investigate how frontline service workers and

supervisors make a standard work in their everyday activities. The outcomes of such activities in terms of organizational-level variations in practices are also investigated.

4 | THE STUDY

4.1 | Research context

At the level of frontline services, NAV offices provide an ideal context for examining the standardization of frontline activation work. NAV offices are complex, multi-purpose, one-stop shops (Minas, 2014) providing integrated employment and welfare services, including social assistance, social security, employment, and other social services. The offices were established with the major administrative NAV reform instituted from 2005 to 2011, merging national employment services, the insurance agency, and municipal social assistance services. In line with international policy trends toward individualized and integrated service delivery (Heidenreich & Rice, 2016), the core objective of the reform was to establish holistic, coordinated services adapted to individual client needs (Fossestøl et al., 2015).

Tensions between organizational standards and conditions for frontline (professional) work represent a core dynamic in organizations like the NAV offices (Berkel & Aa, 2012; Fossestøl et al., 2015; Fuertes & Lindsay, 2016). In the years after the reform, the offices were increasingly standardized, with strong emphases on procedures, tools, routines, performance, uniformity, and rationality (Fossestøl et al., 2015). While practitioners' discretion, skills, knowledge, and ethics are central to achieving policy goals (Gjersøe, 2020), NAV staff have heterogeneous educational backgrounds (Sadeghi & Fekjaer, 2018). Such professional diversity, lack of a common knowledge base, and strong organizational demands are general features of activation work (Berkel & Aa, 2012). A government-appointed expert committee identified several challenges in NAV that prevented the delivery of individualized, user-centered services: overly strict and bureaucratic procedures, inadequate client involvement, lack of contact with employers, and overreliance on external activation providers (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015–2016).

To develop individualized, work-oriented follow-up services for clients with complex problems, NAV implemented the government-funded In-house Follow-up program in 2017. The program provided funding to NAV offices for establishing in-house employment specialist teams. By the end of 2019, approximately one third of the country's 326 offices had these teams. The teams adhere to either the IPS model or a modified standard developed internally by NAV. While NAV counselors (i.e., the main occupational category in the NAV offices) assess and refer clients to external activation providers (e.g., sheltered work enterprises) and have caseloads of 40–130 clients, employment specialists provide more comprehensive and individualized follow-up concerning clients' employment and work context, in accordance with a "place- train" paradigm (Frøyland et al., 2018). The employment specialists also have smaller caseloads of 15–20 clients. Employment specialists collaborate with counselors, who are responsible for administrative follow-up (including finance and welfare benefit issues), and mental health professionals.

Like several other EBPs, IPS includes a fidelity scale (Drake et al., 2012). The 25-point scale indicates the extent to which the local service "adheres to specific model standards" (Bond & Drake, 2019, p. 874) and specifies many aspects of the service related to the organization, team roles, and work tasks. Central IPS principles include a focus on competitive employment (i.e., ordinary, paid jobs), rapid-start job search, systematic job development based on client preferences, time-unlimited and individualized follow-along support, integration of activation and mental health services, and service eligibility based on work motivation (Drake et al., 2012). For example, the employment service is structured into six phases: intake, engagement, assessment, job placement, job coaching, and follow-along support (Becker et al., 2015). The standard includes performance indicators to monitor activities of individual employment specialists (e.g., the number of face-to-face employer contacts per week on behalf of specific clients, percentage of work hours spent out in the community meeting clients and employers). The standard also requires biannual fidelity reviews performed by external evaluators.

Overall, the "new" occupational role of employment specialists is integrated into the institutionalized organizational context of NAV offices. In these processes, central organizational actors include the local NAV office managers

and frontline supervisors, the latter being in charge of implementing the standard in frontline work (e.g., by monitoring and supervising IPS teams). While the IPS standard systematizes implementation, managers have significant leeway in how the local services are organized. This leeway includes, for example, the team's structure and how the team is integrated in the organization. This balance between managerial and organizational autonomy (involving local needs and aims) and the pre-defined structure of the standard form the empirical background of the study.

4.2 | Methods and data

This article focuses on two NAV offices following the IPS model as examples of evidence-based standards and is based on in-depth interviews and fieldwork conducted in 2017–2018. The two offices were selected due to their longstanding experience with the IPS standard. They can be considered critical cases (Flyvbjerg, 2006)—that is, offices that are more likely than others to be attentive to following the standard. The standard had been part of regular services in these offices for several years, and the managers had a strong commitment to service development.

Both offices had two employment specialist teams providing follow-up to similar client groups. The IPS team provided services for clients receiving mental health treatment and had clients referred from these services. The In-house Follow-up teams worked with wider target groups (e.g., people with substance abuse problems or somatic health problems, youth, and refugees) referred by NAV counselors. Table 1 provides the key characteristics of the two offices.

The interview data consist of 60 interviews with office managers, middle managers, frontline supervisors, employment specialists, and NAV counselors; these interviews were conducted in several rounds between March 2017 and December 2018 (see Table 2). While some authors (Nicolini, 2013) have suggested that observation is more appropriate than interviews for studying practice because people have difficulties in talking about what they actually do, other authors have stressed the value of using interviews, asserting that people can talk in revealing ways about actions and routine practices (Hitchings, 2012). Interviews are also useful for deepening our understanding of "how people make sense of their work and the issues they believe are important" (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 84).

The informants were encouraged to talk about their role, professional background, the nature of their work with clients and employers, collaboration with other professionals and services, use of knowledge in their work, and views regarding the organization, managers, and the standard. Most interviews were performed by the first author, while some were performed by the second author and other researchers on the project team. The interviews lasted from 45 to 90 min. Prior to the interviews, informed, written consent was obtained from each informant. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by external transcribers, and the informants were coded to make the statements attributable to individuals while maintaining their anonymity. This coding was based on role (EMP for employment specialists, SUP for supervisors, MAN for managers), numbering for each informant, and office (A and B). Given the focus on employment specialist practices, the counselor interviews were not part of the analysis but were used as background material to inform the understanding of the two organizations.

The fieldwork comprised a total of 30 days in the two case offices. Field observation is useful for capturing work practices as they unfold, experiencing ongoing negotiations between actors, and avoiding overreliance on retrospective interview accounts (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). The first author spent 15 days in office A (between November 2017 and February 2018) and 15 days in office B (from March to April 2018). The fieldwork involved observing daily life and team meetings in the organizations and shadowing employment specialists as they traveled in the local community and met with employers and participants. The fieldwork was documented in field notes.

4.3 | Analysis

The analytic process was abductive, involving iterations between raw data, themes, and theory (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2011; Timmermans & Tavory, 2014). The analysis was primarily based on the interviews, but it was also informed by the fieldwork experiences and field notes. HyperResearch qualitative analysis software was used.

TABLE 1 Comparison of offices A and B

	Office A	Office B
Geographical setting	Rural municipality	Urban municipality
Staff	Under 60	Under 200
Organization	Three departments (specialized model): • Welfare (including social assistance) • Follow-up (including the youth team) • Employment specialists	Three departments (generalist model): • Each department covers all services • Staff further divided in teams • Two employment specialist teams
Managers	One top manager, three department managers	One top manager, two vice-top managers, three department managers, team leaders
Employment specialist teams	• Two teams: IPS and in-house follow-up • Both teams follow the IPS standard[a] • Staff: 13 in November 2018	• Two teams: IPS and in-house follow-up • Both teams follow the IPS standard[a] • Staff: 14 in November 2018
Clients per worker[b] (approximation, November 2018)	• Standard effort, situational effort: 100 • Specially adjusted effort: 40–45 • Employment specialist: 12–20	• Standard effort, situational effort: 120–130 • Specially adjusted effort: 60–70 • Employment specialist: 10–20

[a]The in-house follow-up teams also followed the IPS standard but were not integrated with mental health services.
[b]NAV allocates clients to one of four categories on the basis of an assessment of support needs: "standard effort," "situational effort," "specially adjusted effort," and "permanently adjusted effort."

TABLE 2 Interviews in offices A and B

Informant role	Office A	Office B
Office managers and middle managers	6	9
Frontline supervisors	2	3
Employment specialists	8	12
Counselors	12	8
Total	28	32

The analysis proceeded in several steps and was based on different analytical strategies. The first stage of analysis focused on a close reading of the informants' accounts of their work practices and what seemed to be the shared practical understandings in the offices. This part of the analysis provided an overview of the informants' comments. A thick case description was written for each office to explore the relationship between each interviewee and the broader office dynamics (Miles et al., 2014). Since the interviews were conducted at different time intervals, key findings and interpretations from each round of interviews were presented to the offices. Feedback from these sessions was used to refine the interpretations.

A thematic, grounded analysis of the interviews was then performed to procure a systematic overview of the material and organizational contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This stage of analysis moved from codes to broader themes and relationships. Five themes, or shared practical understandings, were elaborated: views on the standard, team situation, client work, employer work, and collaboration. These themes were used to compare the two offices and identify differences between the informants from the two sites. Sections 5.1 and 5.2 examine the results of this analysis.

In the final stage of analysis, the organizational-level factors that seemed to influence and explain the variation between the two sites were examined. These factors were identified inductively by "zooming out" (Nicolini, 2009,

p. 130) and comparing similarities and differences between the two sites. This was combined with a sensemaking strategy examining interactions between "alternate templates" (Langley, 1999)—that is, between alternative interpretations of the dynamics in each case, based on the empirical material. Although the identified factors offered sensible explanations of case differences, other theoretical factors may not have been identified by this inductive approach. The results of this analysis are summarized in Section 5.3.

5 | "MAKING IPS WORK" IN THE TWO FRONTLINE ORGANIZATIONS

In this section, the organizational work practices and understandings in the two offices are compared. The analysis is summarized in Table 3.

5.1 | Office A: Standardization as "practice shift"

At the organizational level, office A sought to use the standard to shift the traditional practices and inward attention in the office toward a focus on employer engagement. Regarding *views of the standard*, the shared work practices in this office involved a strong adherence to the principles of the standard. According to two employment specialists in this office, "The results are evidence-based through 30 years. There's no point discussing whether it works or not" (EMP5A; EMP4A). Several others talked about belief and loyalty to the model: "I really believe in the model. The higher the score [in fidelity reviews], the closer to IPS it is, and better quality to participants" (EMP8A). Informants frequently spoke of "staying true to the intention" of the standard:

> Some of the points [of the fidelity scale] seem silly, until you understand the intention and thoughts behind [them]. [...] For example, why you should spend 65 percent of your office time outside of office. [...] The intention is that jobs are not created in the office, and you don't see them there; you have to go out. (EMP8A)

A key reason for this strong shift in attention and practices toward employer engagement was that the vast majority of employment specialists lacked previous experience in NAV and welfare services. Indeed, office A was characterized by workers with non-professional backgrounds from the private sector who instead had knowledge of employers, recruitment, and the labor market. One exception was an informant with a healthcare background. For these employment specialists, the standard was a way to grasp a new and unfamiliar role, providing "the frame around everything" (EMP5A; EMP7A):

> I didn't have any foundation for thinking differently than what I was trained in, in a way. [...] Since I didn't have any prior NAV experience, I didn't have any other work method [...] So, I thought it was really nice to have some frames to relate to. (EMP4A)

One core activity in the standard-based practices is individualized *client work* through pre-defined phases, from intake via job placement to follow-along support. Many clients have unstable life situations, such as periods of more acute mental health illness, personal crises, substance abuse rehabilitation, loss of work and starting over again, and economic difficulties. In this office, the employment specialists had limited professional competence or client follow-up techniques to draw on. Informants emphasized a common-sense approach to client work: "You have to have some healthy common sense [...] you need to want to help those people; you cannot go in and have a bad attitude" (EMP7A; EMP5A). Several informants viewed client work as particularly difficult: "The most challenging thing is to relate to so many different personalities. You have to twist your head around all the time, right" (EMP7A; EMP6A).

TABLE 3 Comparison of work practices and understandings in offices A and B

	Office A	Office B
Views on the standard	Seen to reinforce a shift in attention and work practices toward employers	Seen to promote a methodological approach enabling work practices toward individual clients
Client work	Emphasis on common-sense approach Challenging because of limited professional competence	Adaptation of standard to enable a holistic client approach and use of professional competence
Employer work	Emphasis on employer engagement and relational work Use of professional competence and resources	Emphasis on common-sense approach Challenging because of limited professional competence
Collaboration	Emphasis on specialization and work division between employment and welfare-oriented tasks	Emphasis on coordination and networking with other public services
Team situation	Positive views on the work environment and performance management	Tensions and critical views on performance management

Another core activity of the service is *work towards employers*—that is, building relationships with specific employers over time. This was the strongest competency of the employment specialists in this office due to their extensive experience and knowledge of the private sector. Some had been employers before, while others had experience with business negotiations, business administration, coaching, recruitment, and sales. Therefore, they used this (professional) knowledge and experience in their work practices. As one informant formulated it, "It's about understanding employers and the job match. [...] You adjust to the tribal language of the employer out there and make it open up" (EMP1A). Others emphasized adjusting their language and approach to different situations: "I'm like a chameleon; I adjust towards different employers. Maybe I'm like this here and like that with another" (EMP3A).

Concerning *collaboration*, employment specialists emphasized the task division as employer-oriented for them and welfare-oriented for the NAV counselors and other frontline professionals: "I'm not supposed to be a psychologist or to intervene in that way. [...] Others can take on their hats, and I can focus on work" (EMP7A). In fact, they did not have much competence regarding the NAV bureaucracy: "I know nothing about NAV things; I know jobs" (EMP4A; EMP7A; EMP6A). This was generally regarded at the office as a key advantage, as they were not stuck in institutionalized work practices. They tended to reinforce cultural work differences between them and the "bureaucratic slowness," rules, and complexities of the NAV system. For example, one informant noted a lack of mutual understanding: "NAV counselors hit their head against the wall and wonder what the hell we are doing. And we are annoyed with counselors; like, what the heck are they supposed to do?" (EMP6A).

Regarding the *team situation*, the standard-based shift was reinforced in team meetings, conversations, and discussions, which promoted adherence to the key elements of the standard (i.e., employer visits, rapid start of the job search, increased work hours spent out in the community meeting employers and clients). The standard was a central element in these meetings, where performance measures tracking the activities of individual employment specialists were emphasized. The shared meanings in this office involved positivity toward this way of organizing the evidence-based work, and many viewed the focus on performance as a motivating factor (EMP4A; EMP2A; EMP7A): "I like results. I think it triggers something positive in me. I think you need something to push you forward" (EMP5A).

5.2 | Office B: Standardization as "practice revival"

The standardization practices in office B were characterized by reviving traditional professional work practices through enabling the employment specialists to provide holistic client follow-up practices. For example, *views on the*

standard emphasized how it enabled employment specialists to "work methodically" (EMP7B) by being "a total package that helps us in daily work, [...] it's really user-centered" (EMP4B). Such holistic client-oriented work was at the core of the traditional emphasis and reform objectives of the NAV reform, which were later marginalized by proceduralism and bureaucracy. Hence, the standard was adapted in this office to promote and re-institutionalize more traditional practices. An employment specialist provided an acute formulation of this general point:

> The method sounds like something very special and unique. But actually, what is it really about? [...]
> Close follow-up of employers and jobseekers. This is what NAV has been trying to do for many years.
> (EMP9B)

The informants had experienced the switch from counselors to employment specialists as a shift from "controlling clients" to "focusing on possibilities" (EMP7B). Two informants emphasized that the standard promoted social work professionalism: "I think I'm more of a social worker in this role than elsewhere in NAV. [...] You get a very different relation to the client" (EMP9B; EMP8B). The role focused on supportive tasks rather than administration of demands and rules. A central feature of office B was that all informants had prior experience as NAV counselors, and 10 out of 12 were educated as social workers or had related welfare backgrounds. This was an important factor influencing work practices within the standard.

A key feature of the standard-based practices in office B was promoting an individualized and comprehensive approach to *client work*. Employment specialists adapted the standard by enacting more holistic client follow-up practices than prescribed (e.g., with housing, social network, economy, and clients' personal lives). They valued addressing client needs in a broad way and argued this way important also to achieve work-oriented goals: "You really do a lot of things that are not counted, that you are not supposed to do, but you see that you have to do them, right" (EMP3B; EMP12B; EMP10B). Some also underlined the flexibility of the standard: "We're quite flexible and decide on many things ourselves" (EMP13B; EMP6B). For example, some employment specialists were involved in clients' social and family networks:

> We talk with family; it's like you become part of their close network in a way, almost become part of
> the family of each jobseeker. So, now I have 11 [clients]. I will have 18 by summer. So, that's a lot
> of families to relate to. (EMP3B)

Conditions defined by the standard, such as lower caseloads, were perceived as enabling the use of professional resources and skills (e.g., as social workers): "You need an understanding of the people you work with. They're not, to use NAV terminology, 'ordinary job applicants'. You need the ability to guide them" (EMP8B; EMP9B). Another informant utilized professional techniques from their professional background in mental health services:

> I use a lot of techniques from cognitive therapy [...] to guide and bring up questions, be curious and
> find their strengths, in a way build them up. [...] I use my background daily. (EMP4B)

Furthermore, many employment specialists mentioned the difficulty of tasks connected with *employer work*: "It's hard to have a bad day at work when you know you have loads of meetings out there" (EMP4B). Another claimed that "it's demanding. I should know the labor market well. You can run a bit empty, run out of ideas" (EMP6B). Informants had limited experience with employers. One particular challenge was to succeed with job placements: "The most difficult part is moving forward, [...] from presenting a candidate, [...] to get the employer to say yes, we have a need now. I think it's difficult" (EMP5B).

Regarding *collaboration*, frontline practices in office B emphasized coordination activities and inter-organizational networking with different public services: "Yesterday, I was in a responsibility group meeting with my participant [...]. It's a big, very fuzzy case [...] I was there with doctor, drug consultant, NAV, and therapist" (EMP7B). Some

employment specialists in office B deviated from the standard by performing administrative tasks to help clients: "It's easy to take care of other stuff, like finances and other things. They [clients] can be like, 'Hey, I have not received social assistance for two months, I cannot get in touch with my counselor—what's up?' Things like that" (EMP12B).

The team situation in office B was characterized by employment specialists being more critical of the performance measures integrated in the standard. As one employment specialist claimed, "There are high expectations about time spent outside and employer contact, and very individualized demands. You're scrutinized very often, much more than you are used to in NAV" (EMP9B). This caused a loss of motivation: "I lose motivation for the process, right, with all the focus on numbers. Even though I know the method is like this or that, I do not need that focus in daily work, like, all the time" (EMP8B). Two informants viewed these performance measures as less problematic: "I do not think it's been very challenging; it's okay. [...] If I need to deliver some results, I just do it. I do not feel a lot of pressure" (EMP6B).

5.3 | Organizational factors contributing to practice variation

The two offices implemented the same procedural standard, and the office managers in both cases had quite similar views regarding the policy signals around employer engagement and the role of the IPS standard in providing services to clients with complex needs: "It's exactly the way we want to work" (MAN1A) and "We have to concentrate resources around what works" (MAN1B). Nevertheless, systematic differences existed at the organizational level regarding how the standard was followed. By focusing on organizational factors contributing to practice variation, this section seeks to develop "a sensible explanation of why the practising is the way it is and not otherwise" (Nicolini, 2009, p. 134).

A central difference between the two offices was in *recruitment practices* and, thus, the professional competence of the employment specialists. Office A hired frontline workers externally; both office managers and frontline supervisors emphasized the importance of employer knowledge and experience from the private sector. One stated, "We see that experience from business life is very useful, from recruitment, sales, or service" (SUP1A). Frontline supervisors also stressed personal suitability for the role, emphasizing commitment, sociability, and people skills. Hence, this recruitment strategy involved hiring staff without experience in the welfare field, who depended on the standard to structure and legitimize their work, instead of recruiting persons with professional welfare backgrounds and NAV experience. This strategy had partly developed in response to negative experiences of hiring internal counselors: "People here enjoy being counselors; they do not necessarily fit to be employment specialists [...] Many in NAV have no understanding of employers" (SUP1A).

In contrast, office B mainly hired employment specialists internally. Consequently, staff were welfare professionals with corresponding educational backgrounds and frontline experience. Reasons for this recruitment strategy could be found in the office managers' views regarding competency requirements, which emphasized the value of professional competence and frontline experience in the new role: "I think they have a great advantage because they understand the [NAV] system, the measures, and the vocabulary, and they have access to information" (MAN2B). Frontline supervisors emphasized that varied backgrounds were relevant and valuable in the role, and belief and trust were important: "You need that faith that anyone can work. That's the main focus" (SUP1B).

The *dynamics between frontline supervisors and staff* constitute another organizational factor that contributes to explaining the practice variation between the two offices. Frontline supervisors in office A actively involved staff in service development and created a good workplace environment: "I need to continuously make sure that people have a good time and are recognized for their work—that they feel attended to and can develop" (SUP1A). Supervisors formally involved staff by delegating tasks and prioritized competency development. They also encouraged their team's critical reflection and deliberation. Previous research has evinced how participatory processes can increase staff support for standards (Sandholtz, 2012), and this was true of office A; the staff highlighted the good work environment and team support they experienced.

In office B, supervisors emphasized the importance of sticking to the "regime" (SUP2B) represented by the standard: "I'm very direct, very result-oriented. [...] because I'm very anchored in the theory, the method" (SUP2B). The frontline supervisor role and team structure were hierarchical, and supervisors did not have clear strategies for involving staff in service development and delegation of tasks and roles, even though the staff comprised experienced professionals. The supervisors focused on the need to "unlearn former counselor habits" (SUP1B) and "cure NAV sickness" (SUP2B)—that is, deviation from the standard. Conflicts and tensions were greater in office B, particularly in one of the two teams, regarding standard requirements and loss of motivation among staff (e.g., because of performance pressure and a focus on activity indicators).

A third organizational factor was differences in *team integration in the local organization*. Informants in office A described the employment specialist team as an "island in the organization." Early in the study, the team was located on a separate floor and had their own logo and website. They developed a strong sense of group identity that was different from the traditional NAV identity, and this contributed to cultural differences and misunderstandings between them and NAV counselors. This lack of integration hindered collaboration. In contrast, the employment specialists in office B were integrated with the other teams in the organization, sitting physically with the NAV counselors. This form of integration contributed to holistic and collaborative practices with NAV counselors but also made the employment specialist team more fragmented.

6 | CONCLUSION

This study uses a practice perspective to examine the everyday usage and adaptation of standardized, evidence-based manuals in activation service delivery. The literature has focused extensively on the challenges of implementing evidence-based standards (Bergmark et al., 2018; Bosk, 2019; Høybye-Mortensen, 2013; Nordesjö et al., 2020; Petersén & Olsson, 2014; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Skillmark et al., 2019; Skillmark & Oscarsson, 2020; Sletten & Bjørkquist, 2020). Thus, this study's aim is to shift attention to the implications of standards for the organizational contexts in which they are used on a situated, day-to-day basis (Schatzki et al., 2001; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013; Timmermans & Berg, 2003).

From this perspective, the study demonstrates the existence of two fundamentally different ways of practicing such evidence-based standards: standardization to promote a shift in institutionalized practices (i.e., from inward emphasis to outward emphasis on employers) and standardization as a revival of traditional (ideal-type) professional work practices (i.e., from rigid, bureaucratized service provision to close, holistic, and personalized service provision). These are important distinctions in evidence-based services that more traditional implementation analyses may overlook or downplay. Focusing on everyday practices provides additional nuance to the organizational significance of evidence-based standardization. Furthermore, the study identifies organizational factors that contribute to explaining practice variations between offices A and B, including recruitment policies, internal formal organization, dynamics between frontline supervisor and staff, and team integration in the wider organization.

This study adds new knowledge to the literature regarding the standardization of frontline service work and activation work. First, the findings highlight the underlying flexibility embedded in standardization (i.e., flexibility within fidelity; Kendall & Beidas, 2007) and how standards may be implemented and adapted in ways that either promote radical change or revive traditional practices. In any case, the significance of this finding is that standards—through relational dynamics between practitioners, frontline supervisors, office managers, and organizational conditions (e.g., recruitment policy, internal formal organization, team integration)—have important implications for organizations. In other words, this finding emphasizes the broader, bidirectional, dynamic, and mutually constitutive relationships between standards, different groups of frontline workers, managers, and organizations.

Second, the findings nuance positions in the literature either for or against procedural standards. Far from promoting simple routinization, the case study suggests that standards can support and legitimize work styles with professional characteristics (e.g., by enabling practitioners to draw on professional repertoires, focusing on

supportive tasks, and by promoting client-centered approaches). However, the standard also introduced individualized performance measurements, structured work tasks, and strong managerial roles. Thus, the findings align those of authors who have identified heterogeneous and diverse consequences of standardization (Høybye-Mortensen, 2013; Robinson, 2003; Skillmark et al., 2019; Timmermans & Epstein, 2010). Yet this study goes further by showing how standardization not only creates tensions between old and new frontline worker identities, managerial and professional agendas, and old and new organizational configurations. It shows how standards can be embedded in organizational practices in ways that promote distinct service practices.

A limitation of this study is the reliance on data from only two research sites. In both sites, managers supported and prioritized the standard. A research design with more varied cases, including offices with more neutral or negative orientations to the standard, could have strengthened the analysis. To address this limitation, we drew on knowledge from other research projects about NAV offices that implemented standards. The limited research design also enabled more in-depth data gathering, which was an advantage for analysis. Another limitation is the rather short time spent doing fieldwork, making it difficult to grasp frontline workers' client and employer follow-up practices, as these unfolded over longer trajectories. We handled this by drawing on the extensive interview material collected through several visits.

This study highlights a need to further examine the mutually constitutive relationship between standards and practitioners, the standard's interaction with organizational factors, and how it affects various worker groups differently. Standards can promote innovative work practices based on central welfare policy ideals in bureaucratic contexts, but they can also engender increased managerialism and control. Therefore, further investigations of how rigidity can be balanced with flexibility and attention to worker skills and agency within frontline service environments are recommended.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared in order to ensure anonymity of research participants and due to privacy restrictions.

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