

Back-to-work and on-the-job support

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Report of the *Conseil d'orientation pour l'emploi*

Executive summary

In France as in other European countries, the concept of support is playing an increasingly important role in employment and insertion policies. Nevertheless, it is still a new notion, with no generally agreed definition of what constitutes support, which is currently used to refer to a wide range of concepts and practices.

The *Conseil d'orientation pour l'emploi* (Employment Advisory Council, COE) has sought to analyse in greater detail the need for support and the available offer and to identify key issues for workers, institutions and public policy. This analysis has been based on a review of professional practices and the available literature evaluating their success.

The report identifies ten priorities that can be used as guidelines to ensure support in job seeking and career management is both relevant and high quality.

The current state and likely outlook for the job market points to a need for support services for the whole labour force, whether employed or not

The concept of back-to-work and on-the-job support has developed against a background of rapid short-term and structural change in the job market: faster and more diverse career changes; increased risk of unemployment, particularly long-term unemployment; a succession of short-term contracts with a trend toward ever-shorter fixed-term contracts; and alternating phases of employment and joblessness. All of this is in a context of changing models of employment and careers and a demand for new skills in the job market.

These transformations have been accompanied by changes in workers' aspirations and behaviour. More and more people are looking to change jobs to boost their income or to find a more rewarding and stable situation. This requires proactive management, preparation for mobility and, therefore, often a need for support. But the intensity and type of expectations in this area vary widely.

Employment support: intended effects and actual impact

Intended effects

Support is about providing people with the advice, tools and resources they need at the right time in light of their individual circumstances. It is intended to help them find a job – the best possible job – or improve their standing in the job market faster and more effectively than they would otherwise manage alone.

Theoretically, support can help people get back to work in a range of ways. It can stimulate effort and improve the effectiveness of job seeking through better knowledge of the job market and more objective skills assessments.

In theory, a better match between workers and jobs means a better functioning labour market, with positive consequences for productivity and employment. Assuming a fixed number of jobs in the economy, supporting certain categories of job seekers can be seen as a way of redistributing employment opportunities and consequently disadvantaging those who do not benefit from support. Such so-called general equilibrium effects can correspondingly reduce the overall effectiveness of the programme.

Lessons from existing assessments

Given the growing importance of support in employment policy, many research studies – mostly involving job seekers – have investigated how effective different programmes have been in delivering results.

Most are quantitative studies, but some qualitative work has been done focusing on the point of view of stakeholders, beneficiaries and the professionals providing the support.

While existing studies do not yet sufficiently examine the efficiency of programmes or any general equilibrium effects, they do provide some lessons on the overall effectiveness of support for job seekers:

- Monitoring and support interviews for job seekers have a generally positive effect on getting them back to work, though this is less true for vulnerable people if programmes have not been appropriately designed.

- Routine checks and penalties can have a positive effect on returning people to work, but they may have a potentially negative effect on the quality of work found.
- Targeted reinforced support programmes are generally effective in terms of returning people to work and improving the quality of work found, but only if they are thorough and intensive.
- Support programmes are generally less costly than active training or job subsidy programmes and have the advantage of being relatively flexible and adaptable to the changing economic environment.

Other studies have tried to go beyond overall effectiveness and peer into the black box of employment support to identify the factors that determine its effectiveness or otherwise.

Though the full report should be read for more exact details on these studies, the success factors include the following:

- Early and regular support, particularly helpful for people identified as being removed from the labour market.
- Flexible personalised use of different channels (face-to-face interviews, follow-up by phone, email or instant messaging) and support methods (individual or group interviews, active processes, workshops, and use of digital tools).
- Dissemination of information about labour markets, particularly using digital tools, which can improve job seeking strategies, expand the outlook of job seekers and therefore shorten the time it takes for them to get back to work.
- Some professional practices by advisors have positive effects – such as developing close links with local businesses or a collaborative process with the job seekers being supported – as does moderate and appropriate provision of training.
- Statistical profiling: when based on a large volume of relevant data on the labour market, this can be a useful back-up to the advisor's expertise in evaluating the obstacles to employment.
- Outsourcing of support: outsourcing can be a way to stimulate and expand the range of services on offer, but it also has risks. Its effectiveness depends on how it is used. Assessment studies report contrasting results in different countries and highlight the importance of learning from experience and getting the outsourcing contracts right.

The current landscape of support services

A common framework, multiple concepts and practices

Most existing support programmes share a number of features: interviews with a dedicated advisor, a meeting frequency that reflects the intensity of the support being given and a framework based on a multi-phase plan (welcome, progress report, professional project, etc.).

Beyond these common features, the implementation of support by different organisations follows a multitude of concepts and strategies. Alongside the classic approach of treating social obstacles first then

moving on to professional issues are other general approaches. These include addressing several issues simultaneously or taking an iterative approach, such as "active mediation", which is based on repeatedly putting the individual in working situations.

We are also seeing an expansion of the areas covered by support, which now increasingly addresses the professional project as a whole and is directed at people in work looking to secure their career paths.

Support players and practices in France today

There is a diverse, even fragmented, range of bodies delivering employment support today. The system has grown out of a complex history involving the launch of different and overlapping schemes driven by the changing labour market and priorities of employment policy. Diversity is still greater on a regional level, chiefly due to the methods used to mobilise local players and associations.

This diversity has its good points. It provides a wealth of support offers and practices, consequently the service can be tailored to needs while providing a degree of specialisation. However, it also poses challenges, particularly when it comes to ensuring effective information sharing and people's access to support. It also makes it harder to avoid silo effects in the services offered and provide coherence and leadership across the system.

Changes underway

Professionalisation of support has progressed but more remains to be done

It is still not possible to draw up a standard profile of the support professional. However, it seems that previous significant work experience tends to be more important than the nature or level of qualifications. On this point, although specialised training is now being developed (studies identified around sixty qualifications), this is still a work-in-progress and relatively modest in scale. On-the-job training is therefore a strategic issue for increasing the professionalism of advisors.

The skills that professionals need are good knowledge of the labour market, the ability to draw up an assessment in conjunction with the individual being supported and use it to develop a professional project, and familiarity with job seeking techniques. Professionalisation also involves other aspects:

- The use of new working methods such as digital tools and collaborative working.
- The rise of "quality processes" through certification, which seek to ensure the professionalism of organisations and the quality of the support offered.

Differentiation and diversification of support for job seekers

The trend is toward greater personalisation of support. This is most evident not only in the new support methods used by the French employment agency *Pôle emploi* but also in those used by other organisations in the field. Specific forms of support are introduced to meet the particular needs of certain job seekers, such as comprehensive support for job seekers with substantial peripheral obstacles to employment or the *Garantie jeunes* (Youth Guarantee) for disadvantaged young people struggling to break into the labour market.

Diversification has also led to a multiplicity of initiatives run by civil society, which, while not replacing action by support professionals, are a useful complement, particularly for those job seekers who have the greatest difficulties. Social innovation in this area is increasingly dynamic.

The rise of on-the-job support to anticipate and secure career paths

Employment support is not restricted to helping job seekers find work. It also has a role in the workplace, whether by preparing hires through different tasks or consolidating their job position by providing them with on-the-job support. It is also relevant for the growing number of people who drift into and out of work or for employees navigating career transitions who need to anticipate and secure their career paths. This aim underlies the creation of the *Conseil en évolution professionnelle* (Council for Career Development).

The digital revolution

In its March 2015 report on “the impact of the internet on the labour market”, the COE showed how the emergence of digital technologies has been a game changer. This is especially true for support services. Digital technology opens up a host of opportunities in this area, encouraging independence, enhancing advisor productivity, providing richer and more accurate information, bringing to light part of the hidden employment market, allowing better targeting of vacancies and improving the content and value added of interviews.

That said, technology also raises challenges, namely:

- Ensuring both job seekers and advisors can access digital tools, use them effectively for professional purposes and make them their own.
- Making sure information is transparent and accurate.

Ten priorities for back-to-work and on-the-job support

Any strong and lasting reduction in unemployment depends primarily on accelerating the pace of job creation. Nevertheless, employment support can have positive effects both in getting job seekers back into work and for the general functioning of the labour market by better matching people to jobs.

It is therefore important to ensure the relevance and quality of support schemes for job seeking and career management. The COE has identified ten priorities which can serve as guidelines for high-quality back-to-work and on-the-job support. Taken together, they form a coherent whole, i.e. no one priority should trump another in either theory or practice.

1 - All employees should be made more aware of the importance of managing their career paths

In a rapidly changing labour market, upskilling and maintaining employability are key issues for workers. However, some employees – usually among the most vulnerable – are unaware of this. The importance of thinking ahead is often misunderstood despite the development of tools such as forward-planning of jobs and skills, professional interviews and advice on professional development.

It is not enough to put new programmes in place: it is the shared responsibility of the public authorities, companies and labour market institutions to radically raise awareness of these issues among all workers. Unions and employers can also play a part. Raising awareness must begin from the moment people first join the labour force and must be integrated with the initial guidance system. This is one of the prerequisites for enhancing career security.

Equally important is a better understanding of the reluctance to seek support, which is revealed by studies among the very people who need it most. Research into their underlying motives would make it possible to construct appropriate solutions.

Finally, we need to dispel some myths. Positive career development does not always require training. Results of assessments looking at when training is useful must be more widely disseminated and better known.

2 - Support services must be better tailored to people's needs and aspirations

Support aims to inform, sustain and guide the individual while helping make them more independent in planning their future career. This needs to be done while taking into account people's aspirations, all the difficulties they may face and the needs of the labour market.

Not all employed or unemployed people need to be supported, or need support at all times.

The public authorities, companies, social partners and labour market institutions should put in place and publicise the support tools and services that are available to all at any time.

It is also important that they are able to reach people who are vulnerable in the labour market and offer them timely support tailored to their needs.

3 - Support must be based on detailed knowledge of the labour market and its prospects and an objective evaluation of a person's skills and aptitudes

A common obstacle that people face in finding work is accurately assessing their place in the labour market.

Misperceptions may lead to a poorly organised or badly targeted job search in terms of sector, career or salary, making it less effective. People who fail may become disillusioned or discouraged, reducing their chances of finding work.

To define and implement an effective job search strategy, support professionals must accurately evaluate individual qualifications and skills – including informal skills – and have a good understanding of all aspects of the local labour market (e.g. job offers, skills demanded by employers, outlook for sectors and careers and what guidance, support and training tools are available).

This may result in confirming someone's professional project, reconsidering it or finding previously overlooked career opportunities. However, the process has to begin with what the individual wants and not with the tools and resources on offer, which depend on the support structure and are always limited.

Such an approach is valuable in supporting not only job seekers but also in helping people in employment to develop their careers.

4 - Support services must be better known and easier to use

There is a rich and diverse array of support services, both in terms of the organisations and the plans available. Despite this, there are two weaknesses.

First, they are not well known. Not all workers and job seekers – and sometimes not even all support professionals – are aware of the full range of resources available to help them. The new *Conseil en*

évolution professionnelle is a good example. It is a potentially powerful tool for career management but remains largely unknown among its potential beneficiaries.

Second, the offer of services is still hard to understand. In this respect, it is paradoxically the risk of too much support coupled with the complexity of our support system that may be discouraging some people from seeking support.

If we are to tackle these risks, the first step is to improve the information and communication around employment support. General information campaigns must highlight the tools available to workers. Companies and unions also have a role in informing employees.

Subsequently, the logic of the single point of contact must be taken further: support professionals have a duty to make the system user-friendly rather than expecting individuals to pick their way through its complexities.

In both cases, the need for better synergy between support players, particularly in information sharing, is indispensable to making support services more comprehensible to individuals.

5 - The rationale for support – which is still mainly based on job status or the service offered – must take better account of the diversity of workers' careers and aspirations

One of the main trends in recent years has been the quest for greater personalisation of services. However, the approach taken is still frequently determined by the activity status sought or the services on offer. The forms of support differ, either with respect to the main organisation or the services offered. They also depend on factors such as:

- The job position (employee, manager, etc.).
- The labour status (employed or unemployed).
- Age.
- Specific circumstances such as whether the individual has disabilities, receives benefits or has been made redundant with a severance package.
- Type of company (large or small).

This status-based approach is obviously useful to the extent to which it allows advisors to direct the person towards more specialised organisations or services tailored to their needs.

But it is becoming less relevant and may even result in people missing out on chances. Based as it is on services provided in silos, it fails to address big changes in the job market. These include greater flexibility of working status with people moving between salaried and freelance work or new forms of employment, more frequent transitions between employment and self-employment and frequent switching between different work statuses. There is also the more stop-go nature of careers, particularly for part-time workers and those alternating unemployment and short-term contracts.

In this environment, strategic management of support is a key issue. The priority is therefore to build approaches where support providers work in partnership. Extending partnership agreements, clarifying the

scope of intervention of each provider and defining modes of collaboration and their efficient roll-out across the country must be the first step. This includes specifying which organisations deal with which categories of people to prevent doubling-up or people slipping through the net and to ensure continuity. The systems for allocating services and sharing information must also be detailed.

6 - The professionalisation of support functions must continue

Support has only become a central issue in employment career management policy fairly recently. This helps explain why its degree of professionalisation, although rising, remains patchy. Skill sets are still unstandardised and do not always lay sufficient emphasis on detailed knowledge of the labour market. Training courses that lead to qualifications are still being developed. Service providers, particularly the smaller or older organisations, are sometimes unclear on the labour market skills they need for their support to be effective.

The quality of support is fundamental. Poor quality may result in a wrong assessment, steering someone down a path that does not match the labour market or towards inappropriate tools. This can lead to severe consequences for the individual, such as missed opportunities, delays in finding work, disruption of long-term employment prospects and discouragement.

Of course, most institutions and other organisations have undertaken studies and action to improve the situation, leading among other things to a greater emphasis on on-the-job training and a trend towards certified quality processes.

Professionalisation must continue and intensify. The effectiveness of support depends heavily on the skills of the person providing it. Progress will involve efforts on several fronts:

- Encouraging the expansion of certification in the support sector, with external audits and approvals by an official body.
- Ensuring advisors have the essential skills to fulfil their support role effectively, whether through professional qualifications, experience or on-the-job training, notably regarding their knowledge of the labour market, relations with companies and communication skills.
- Investing in on-the-job training of advisors and modernisation of the tools available (e.g. software to support knowledge of the labour market or customer relationship management [CRM] and tools for collaborative working).

7 - Support must make better use of online tools

New technology has revolutionised the employment support sector. The COE already highlighted in its March 2015 report the profound changes to the way the labour market works. The same is true for support services.

Digital technology opens up new opportunities for people as technology can be a major way to enhance independence. It also has great potential for organisations as a source of major efficiency gains. The main public and private organisations have started to adopt new technologies, but the process remains uneven.

There are three kinds of opportunities for individuals and organisations.

First, the internet and digital tools make it easier to access and share more detailed up-to-date local information on the labour market. This includes job offers, recruitment prospects, skills matching and training.

New tools have also become available, such as the 100% online support offering tested by *Pôle emploi* for job seekers with the highest chances of finding work. There are also new applications for people to carry out their own assessments or interactively prepare interviews.

Finally, technology is giving professionals powerful tools to help them in their work (tools for assessment support, relationship management, etc.).

But such opportunities come with risks that it is also important to address.

The first issue is access to and management of digital technology. It is not simply a matter of giving people internet access, though this could be helped by better use of digital public spaces, for example. Rather, it concerns poor digital skills generally, particularly when trying to bring people into the workforce. One way to make this easier is to develop more user-friendly tools. In this respect it is important that the initial support assessment picks up cases of digital illiteracy.

The second issue is the effective use of technology by professionals. It is crucial that support staff are directly involved in building and improving these tools.

The final issue is sharing information and transparency. Professionals providing support can now more readily share information on the labour market or individuals, particularly in government employment agencies. But silos still exist, not just in the management of databases but also in the sharing of files on individuals, even though they are likely to go from one organisation to another over the course of their project. It is also important to monitor the quality of data and tools provided, which means supervising the transparency and quality of data and algorithms used when developing online employment support tools and mobile applications for workers.

In its March 2015 report on the impact of the internet on the functioning of the labour market, the COE made a number of proposals on this matter. It wants them implemented.

8 - Support practices must take better account of academic reviews and learn from experience

The results of academic assessment studies and feedback from experience of support practice on the ground must be better taken into account – and this will have to be done in light of financial constraints. We already have some sufficiently robust lessons – particularly on support for job seekers – which will allow us to better allocate resources between support and other employment policies and strengthen the effectiveness of support practices.

First, the studies agree on the positive effects that support can have for unemployed people returning to work. Such policies are also cheaper than active training or subsidising employment and have the advantage of being relatively flexible and adaptable to changes in the economy.

That said, the effectiveness and efficiency of support can vary depending on the methods used and people involved. While there is no single model for effective support, a number of points have been shown to improve its effectiveness:

- Prioritise early assessment so the job seeker can be directed as quickly as possible towards appropriately intensive support or the process best suited to their circumstances. At this point it is good to be judicious in referring people for training, which is not always the best solution for everyone.

- Seek to maintain an adequately intensive level of monitoring and support while making use of all channels (e.g. face-to-face interviews, follow-ups by phone, email and instant messaging) and methods (e.g. individual or group interviews, active processes, workshops, use of digital tools, complementary support offered by civil society, etc.). Some form of contact must always be maintained, even for the most independent people.
- Prefer non-sequential support for people who face the most obstacles to work. Experience shows that the long-standing dominant model, which seeks to deal first with peripheral obstacles to employment (e.g. problems with health, housing, transport, family, finances, etc.) is not always appropriate for those facing the greatest difficulties finding work. It is often necessary to start professional support in parallel, or even prioritise periods of work experience. Support must be comprehensive for all individuals and effectively integrate any peripheral obstacles to working.
- Continue to support the most vulnerable people once they are back in work, for instance those engaged in employment-based integration programs or people with disabilities, (example: best practices developed by support structures for people starting their own business). This can sometimes mean extending the support process from the person to the company that takes them on.
- Regardless of the support system, strike a good balance between support on the one hand and controls and credible sanctions on the other. Remember that while the two latter approaches are effective in getting people back to work, they can also have negative consequences for the quality of the jobs found and the well-being of the people involved if badly combined or misconceived.

9- Social experimentation should be encouraged

Support for job seekers is still a relatively recent field and an area open to social innovation.

Such experimentation is already well integrated by support providers in the government employment agencies and other institutions in the field, particularly in the voluntary sector.

This makes it possible to build on best practice to find solutions for as yet unmet needs or to respond faster to emerging needs. It should be continued and extended.

It remains the case that for effective and transposable support methods to emerge, two preconditions must be in place: a broad field and a clear framework.

The first condition relates to the institutions responsible for innovation. It is important to encourage the broadest possible field for such experimentation, which means involving both government employment agencies and all other providers of support, including charities, companies, foundations, civil society, etc. Help with spinning off successful initiatives by the government is also a key way to expand the offer of support in an environment where needs are not always being met.

The second condition concerns the framework under which innovations take place. Two experimental approaches co-exist: experiments initiated by bodies involved in employment policy – which are governed by a precise set of specifications designed to test a previously developed model – and experiments leaving more room for manoeuvre as to the content of the support but which are managed by results. All must be evaluated.

Also, a national call for projects could be held each year to draw out new initiatives and manage their development and evaluation.

10- The culture of performance evaluation and monitoring must become widespread

A final key issue is to make sure that the various forms of support offered achieve their pre-set aims and to pursue continuous improvement on this basis.

Developing such an evaluation culture requires four things.

First, it involves measuring the satisfaction of individuals. Feedback from these surveys should be reported back to advisors.

Second, it requires the implementation of systems for effective monitoring and assessment. This means that management by results has a role in employment policy. It entails picking indicators that are relevant and consistent with the aims pursued (the aims themselves must also be clearly defined).

The third requirement is transparency. Results must be published as widely as possible. This is not yet being done despite substantial progress in recent years.

The final requirement is academic assessment. Despite many micro-economic assessment studies carried out recently in France and abroad, the black box of support remains largely unexplored. This is particularly true when it comes to analysing the overall effectiveness of systems for which there is still too little cost-benefit research, which is essential to determining the efficiency of support policies.