European Network of Public Employment Services

Dematerialisation of services in EU PES

Assuring full access to the PES services for people with limited opportunities

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The process of the dematerialisation of services is widespread practice across all public services. Broadly defined, dematerialisation means the reduction in the quantity of materials required to provide a product or service – essentially doing more with less and fundamental to achieving this is the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in the delivery of services. Public Employment Services (PES) have been prime movers in this development principally through the digitalisation of services, though for most PES this has been blended with more traditional delivery channels such as face-to-face contact with jobseekers through jobcentres (or their equivalent). However, the pace of change is accelerating, and in some PES, online services have become a significant channel of delivery and it is conceivable that some PES will soon be delivering most (though may be not all) of their services virtually. Furthermore, the Covid-19 crisis has provided an unexpected stimulus to online services and it will be interesting to assess if this has contributed to the speed at which digital services will be embraced by PES customers in the future.

For most users of PES services, the dematerialisation process is likely to have been relatively painless and can offer more efficient delivery in terms of such factors as speed of access to services and greater transparency in the range of support available. However, as a recent report (Pietersen W, 2019) has pointed out: *'The success of any technological innovation is determined by the degree to which people are able to interact with it'.* In short, there will be some customer sub-groups that may not be well-served by the changes in the methods of service delivery, such as those with limited digital skills, limited access to internet services, or those with certain disabilities that may require an enhanced approach to accessibility.

To explore this subject further, the PES Network, through the PES Benchlearning project, commissioned this ad hoc study of the dematerialisation of PES services – assuring full access to them for people with limited opportunities.

1.2 Study aims and objectives

The aims of the study are summarised as follows:

- demonstrate how PES can combine the dematerialisation of services with taking account of the important issues that enable access for user groups who might face challenges;
- through a small sample of PES, illustrate how equal access to services is ensured for all user sub-groups. This should particularly focus on the risks involved where access to services can be difficult (e.g. affecting access to benefits);
- show how PES tackle the effects of the digital divide when developing services through dematerialisation and what processes and practices are put in place;
- show whether specific PES services for customers located in the more remote areas of countries are effective in their reach, particularly for young people.

These aims and objectives of the study have been incorporated into the approach taken in the research as described in 1.3 below.

1.3   Research approach

To maximise the value from the limited resources available for this study, most of the effort has been focused on gathering information from the case study PES. Five PES were selected and approved by the European Commission (EC) and PES Network for inclusion in the study to allow as broad a coverage as possible among PES at different stages in the dematerialisation of services and in different contexts (such as PES structures, labour market factors and accessibility issues).

The research involved several separate, though interrelated stages as follows:

1. secondary research
2. identification of suitable PES case studies
3. conduct of PES case studies
4. analysis and reporting.

Each of these stages is described below.

Stage 1 - Secondary research

The secondary research was a highly focused activity geared to the following two issues:

- clarification of those sub-groups of the PES customer base that may be adversely affected by the dematerialisation of services and the likely effects on those potentially disadvantaged in the process;
- identification of those PES likely to offer interesting practice examples of how they have addressed the dematerialisation of services to these customer sub-groups.

Most secondary information of direct relevance to this study is found in reports from the PES network and even here the sources are limited. Where helpful to the debate, the information has been incorporated into the relevant sections of the report with references at the end.

Stage 2 – Identification of suitable PES case studies

The case study approach was deemed to be the most appropriate to gather enough depth of information to address the research aims (rather than a wider, but less detailed survey, for example). The five PES selected reflected those at different stages of dematerialisation, from cases where the aim is to deliver most services virtually, to those maintaining a more substantial blended (multi-channel) service provision. Due consideration was also given to different sized PES reflecting perhaps a large geographical area with associated issues of rurality, to smaller countries where PES might face different issues.

The five PES contributing to the study were:

- Bulgaria (the National Employment Agency) – a country with a significant Roma population and with outreach services that target those who potentially could be left behind in the rollout of online services;
- France (*Pôle emploi*) – a country with strong online services and well-developed provision for the delivery of PES services to different customer sub-groups using a range of approaches and partnerships;
- Slovenia (Employment Service of Slovenia) – a small country with a well-developed PES services including ensuring access for those in all areas;
- Spain (*Servicio Público de Empleo Estatal*, SEPE) – a large country with a strong regional PES structure delivering services including in areas with significant rural accessibility issues;
- Sweden (Arbetsförmedlingen) – a well-developed PES with extensive online provision and moving quickly to shifting many services to external providers under a 'digital first' agenda.

The cooperation of these five PES for this study at a time of great challenge for them due to the Covid-19 crisis is greatly appreciated.

Stage 3 – Conduct of PES case studies

PES were exceptionally busy in dealing with a rapid growth of new customer registrations following the Covid-19 crisis, coupled with restrictions on how staff can be deployed. This meant that online services played a crucial role in engaging with new customers (as well as dealing with existing ones) and will have tested as never before on their effectiveness. However, despite this, all case study PES responded in a timely manner that enabled the report schedule to be adhered to.

A focused questionnaire was developed (see Annex) consisting of ten questions set under four main headings as follows:

A. customer sub-groups needing special attention;

B. monitoring effectiveness;

C. effectiveness of the solutions (strengths and weaknesses);

D. future strategies.

The questionnaires were sent to the PES representative as recommended by the AFEPAs. This approach saw the PES representative as a conduit within their PES who could direct questions and assemble the necessary information from their colleagues, where appropriate.

Stage 4 – Analysis and reporting

The research findings from all stages of the work have been analysed and form the basis of this report.

2. Dematerialisation of services in practice

2.1 The dematerialisation of services in practice

For most PES the concept of dematerialisation is likely to be synonymous with the digitalisation of services and within this, the different customer sub-groups may have their own dedicated service delivery plans, set within the wider planning framework. However, this is not always the case. Sweden, for example, does not formally identify customer sub-groups, though there are assumptions made on those customers that might be more vulnerable in the shift to more online services. In general, the view is that those with less prospects of finding work tend to have fewer digital skills, which may contribute to being less 'job-ready' as well as less able to use online job search methods.

For obvious reasons, Covid-19 has accelerated the shift away from face-to-face delivery to remote support but not just online (including the use of apps[1]), but also telephone call centre usage and it will be interesting to see how durable this shift has been.

2.2 Customer groups affected

Based on a preliminary assessment, the key PES customer sub-groups are likely to include those with the following characteristics:

- limited digital skills
- limited (or no) access to the internet through lack of personal equipment
- limited access to the internet through infrastructural issues (e.g. poor broadband in rural locations)
- language issues (including certain migrants, those with basic skills needs, etc.)
- disability concerns that require special provisions (e.g. sight, aural or mental).

A study on outreach involving six case study PES (European Commission, 2008) suggested a narrower focus for using outreach facilities as follows:

- older workers
- working age women not in the labour force
- ethnic minorities
- migrants.

However, this is not to suggest that all these groups were currently well-served by outreach services in the six-case study PES in the EC study. Older workers and working age women tended not to be targeted, though the latter group did have some support from NGOs in some cases. Interestingly, the report felt that: '*In many cases the primary emphasis is on social inclusion rather than specifically on activation (of the unemployed)*'.

The questionnaire for this current ad hoc study identified six PES customer sub-groups likely to face difficulties with the extension of services delivered online and also asked the case study PES to list any additional categories. Table 1 lists the sub-groups along with the response from each case study PES.

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[1] An application, especially as downloaded by a user to a mobile device (see https://www.lexico.com/definition/app).

Table 1. Extent to which customer sub-groups are likely to have difficulties with online services

Customer sub-group	A great deal	Quite a lot	Somewhat	Very little	Not at all
1. People living in remote/rural area	ES		FR	BG, SI, SE	
2. People with limited skills in IT or basic skills		BG, SI, SE	FR	SE	
3. People with poor access to IT equipment and internet	SI	BG, ES	FR		
4. Non-native speakers with language issues		BG, ES, FR, SI, SE			
5. People with physical or mental disability or long-term health issues		ES, SE	BG, FR, SI		
6. Young people in remote/rural areas			ES, FR	BG, SI, SE	
7. Other sub-group(s)					
• Victims of gender violence	ES				
• Unemployed over 45			FR		
• Older adults			SE		
• Women			SE		

Source: PES case studies

For the specified six sub-groups, those identified with the greatest challenge were 'non-native speakers with language issues' with all five PES citing this as a significant issue. All five PES also reported some difficulties for those with 'physical or mental disability or long-term health issues', though this was particularly significant for two PES (Slovenia and Spain). Two PES reported the most significant difficulties, the first for 'people living in remote/rural areas' (Spain) with just one other (France) identifying this as an issue. The second was 'people with poor access to IT equipment and the internet' (Slovenia) which was also a significant issue for two PES (Bulgaria and Spain) and less so for one (France).

PES were asked to identify any other customer sub-groups likely to be adversely affected by more services going online and three PES responded. 'Victims of gender violence' was felt to be a significant issue in Spain, while 'unemployed over 45 years of age' (France) and 'older adults' and 'women' (Sweden) were flagged up with less severe issues but both groups had higher proportions of those customers with worse prospects of finding a job.

Overall, the response shows a somewhat mixed set of observations from the five PES on which customer sub-groups are most at risk from the shift in service delivery. Most concerns seem to coalesce around the sub-groups of those with limited IT skills, poor access to IT and the internet, those non-native speakers with language issues, and those with physical or mental disability or long-term health issues. Some of these factors are likely to be linked. For example, poor access to IT and the internet could limit an individual's ability to acquire IT skills, which could be compounded by those with language difficulties.

2.3   Access to IT and the internet

Key to the successful digitalisation of services is access to IT and the internet and, importantly, whether potential users can use them effectively. Data from Eurostat (2020) shows that in 2018 the percentage of households with access to the internet at home in the EU-28 was 89% with a range from 72% (Bulgaria) to 99% (Netherlands) (Table 2). Given that in 2007 the percentage of households with internet access was 55% in the EU-28, this represents significant progress in accessibility over ten years. Furthermore,

most of the connections (86%) in 2018 were broadband and access has become not only more widespread, but cheaper and better quality – all essential prerequisites for success in promoting e-government and online delivery of services.

Table 2. Percentage of households with access to the internet at home (2018)

Country	Percentage with internet
EU-28	89
Bulgaria	72
France	89
Slovenia	87
Spain	86
Sweden	93
Netherlands	98

Source: Eurostat

But, while there the data tends to show there is no significant digital divide between urban and rural areas, some differences do exist. For example, EU-28 households in cities and towns have comparatively higher levels of access with 91% in cities, 89% in towns and 85% in rural areas, though this differs between countries.

However, access to the internet does not necessarily translate directly into its usage. The 2018 data for the EU-28 shows that more than 85% of all individuals aged 16-74 used the internet at least once in the three months prior to the survey date. More frequent use was lower, with 76% accessing the internet daily and 11% had never used it (though this was significantly lower than the 33% in 2008). Another interesting statistic on internet usage is that in 2018 around 69% of internet users did so on the move (e.g. using a tablet or a smart phone).

3. Measures to ensure access to services for vulnerable groups

3.1 People living in remote/rural areas

Spain identified a significant issue with delivering services to those in remote/rural areas. PES services are largely the responsibility of the 17 autonomous regions with the national body (SEPE) taking an over-arching role. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, improving access to services included the use of mobile units where PES staff set up in town halls (or similar municipal premises) every fortnight to meet with customers. However, the COVID-19 crisis has curtailed this activity and created a much-enhanced remote service (see Box 1). This includes making all services available online, but also via the telephone (including the development of an app) which should help ensure that difficulties in accessing IT and the internet do not prohibit access to services.

Box 1. Spain: Changes to service delivery in response to the COVID-19 crisis

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, it is estimated that there has been a reduction of some 8 million visits to PES offices in Spain. To protect PES staff and maintain customer services the following initiatives have been introduced:

- RATEL, the national telephone advice service has worked extended hours (from 9.00-20.00 instead of 9.00-14.00);
- customer support centre providing information to businesses strengthened with support by an outside company;
- telephone support by benefit office staff with face-to-face staff now providing this enhanced remote support;
- preliminary customer applications where managers contact applicants by telephone;
- most PES staff (around 91%) working remotely resulting in significantly fewer office visits;
- benefit recipients allowed to take jobs in the food sector combining income with benefits.

In other PES, the use of mobile offices travelling to the more remote areas is also practiced. This is the case in Bulgaria, for example, where customers can use EURES services to seek job offers abroad which can be accessed via the mobile service. In other PES the emphasis is more on ensuring that each local area is well-served by physical support services. For example, in France customers can visit the network of Public Service Centres[2] or to local access points to get access to IT and the internet, with assistance if required.

In Slovenia, the issue of remoteness/rurality is not considered an impediment to accessing PES services given the good road and broadband network throughout the country, coupled with an evenly distributed PES local office network. The PES offers a multi-channel service model comprising access to information sources ranging from basic to more sophisticated methods to suit all customer requirements, self-service counselling tools and personal counselling (including telephone, email, online portal, etc.), in addition to face-to-face counselling at local offices.

According to a report on outreach services by PES (European Commission, 2008) among the six-case study PES it examined, three (Bulgaria, Estonia and Germany) used mobile

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[2] The Public Service Centres (*Maisons de services au public*) are one-stop-shops based in municipalities offering information and advice on a wide range of local and national government services.

PES offices to reach the more remote areas not well-served by fixed offices. These tended to be conducted by PES staff in partnership with other local agencies (considered essential) visiting local communities once or twice per month. However, PES saw this as a costly way of delivering their services. In a few cases this outreach activity was highly targeted, such as in Romania where the PES provided 'employment caravans' aimed at the Roma population.

3.2　People with limited skills in IT or basic skills

All PES recognise the need for customers to be digitally competent to deal with the growing service provision online. In France, for example, the PIX test is used, *inter alia*, to assess the level of digital skills of jobseekers and identify their needs which are met through a range of support activities (see Box 2). However, profiling has a much wider role in identifying vulnerable groups and then steering them to the appropriate channels – which might be more conventional face-to-face contact at least in the first instance, rather than digital delivery.

Box 2. France: Help available for improving the digital skills of customers

- Support from those with good digital skills in Public Service Centres and France Services agents (of which there are 544 located throughout the country in addition to the 900 Pôle emploi local agencies and the 450 Missions Locales dedicated to young jobseekers).
- PES partnership with organisations offering digital training (e.g. media libraries, digital public spaces and social centres).
- Vouchers available to jobseekers, each given five with a face value of EUR 10 per voucher to access qualified digital mediation structures.

The use of profiling[3] was strongly suggested in a report on multi-channel delivery of PES services (Pietersen, 2017) as a way of identifying individual needs for using IT effectively and Box 3 gives the example of the three categories used in Estonia. However, it may involve more than simply delivering the practical training necessary since some customers may have a strong reluctance to use online channels stemming, for example, from a suspicion of government and its agencies. In such circumstance there may be a need for extensive training (and convincing) for the customer if they are to embrace the technology. It was also suggested that preconceptions of the differences in IT abilities need to be curbed since the author suggested that variables such as education are stronger predictors of digital skills than age or gender.

Box 3. Estonia: Categorising the digital skills of PES customers

The PES in Estonia categorises jobseekers into one of three categories based on an assessment of their digital proficiency:

- with sufficient digital skills able to use digital services without support;
- with basic digital skills who need some support to get the best from digital services;
- those not able to use e-services and need intensive support.

Source: Thematic Learning Dialogue on e-services and channel management (EC, 2019).

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[3] 'Profiling' is an accepted part of the PES performance terminology and refers to the assessment of an individual's employment potential ideally in a holistic way using a range of methods. It enables the support offered by the PES to be customised to the needs of the individual in their search for employment.

Bulgaria also offers digital competence training, coupled with access to the E-Zones in Local Office Directorates, plus personal assistance where needed. In Slovenia and Spain, there appears to be less of an emphasis on remedial training for those with limited digital skills, and more on the provision of alternatives such the use of telephone options (including dedicated apps) in the former country and the multi-channel approach in the latter.

The Swedish PES provides basic online digital skills training including through the dedicated unit called 'Digital Commitment' that provides training for PES staff and for jobseekers. More recently, the PES has collaborated with the Google Digital Academy in an initiative entitled '*Digital Jag*' (Digital Me)[4]. This offers a range of online modules under the three main headings of: security and integrity; digital communication; and applying for a job online. Furthermore, in the belief that bridging the digital gap is largely about engendering trust in government agencies, in 2020 there will be an ESF project (Democratic Digitalisation) that targets the lack of digital skills and involve several government agencies and municipalities.

3.3 People with poor access to IT equipment and internet

In most countries access to the internet has grown to the extent that most households are connected. For example, in Slovenia it is estimated that in those households with at least one member aged 16-74 around 90% have internet access. However, the quality of access in different areas of countries can vary, with variable broadband speeds and in some cases costs that might be prohibitive to some households.

Where PES customers do not have personal access to IT at home, the obvious choice is for them to use the various public access points found in every country. In Bulgaria, for example, the E-Zones in the Labour Office Directorates are an important focus, with the added advantage that there is help on hand for those needing guidance in the use of the IT, though with the disadvantage that they have limited opening hours. Another source are the group events organised by the PES such as jobs fairs, information days and the regular daily contacts with customers.

In Slovenia, the emphasis is on a multi-channel approach to communications with telephone-based access seen as an important alternative where internet access may be difficult. There is also an array of places where IT and the internet can be accessed free of charge such as public libraries, schools and even bars, underlining the reality that accessing PES services is not dependent on home-based access. France also has an extensive network of drop-in centres in its own and partner organisations where customers can access IT and the internet free of charge, again with support available in its use if needed.

Adding more generally to the case study findings, a study (Lindsay C, 2005) investigated the current and potential role of ICT in job seeking activities of the unemployed[5]. It found that there was a strong association between higher levels of 'economic' capital (i.e. income) and 'cultural' capital (i.e. skills) and use of the internet for job search. It concluded that there is a strong case for a commitment to the development of community-based technology centres and training in IT for the unemployed.

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[4] Further information (in English) is as: https://www.digitalajag.se/.

[5] The research was centred on the city of Glasgow, Scotland (UK).

3.4   Non-native speakers with language issues

Access to PES services for non-native speakers represents a common concern and at least three types of customers can be identified:

- third country nationals (e.g. asylum seekers)
- EU nationals (freedom of movement)
- national minorities in countries.

Each group is likely to have some language needs, though to varying extents and often requiring different approaches. Box 4 illustrates the approach in Slovenia. In Spain, most information is limited to the official languages of Spain, with no widespread provision for information in some of the main languages of third country nationals (e.g. Arabic) or EU nationals (e.g. Romanian). For EU nationals the network of EURES advisers offer support through various methods. However, some of the autonomous regions do offer some information on their websites in other languages (e.g. in Navarre in English and French).

Box 4. Slovenia: Tackling the needs of non-native language speakers

- Third country nationals – dedicated counsellors are available and face-to-face meetings can involve an interpreter if required. Some leaflets are also available in various languages.
- EU nationals – the network of EURES advisers is available face-to-face, via email or telephone.
- National minorities – in those areas with ethnic minority populations (e.g. Hungarian, Italian) there are counsellors available with the necessary language skills and the most important information on the PES website is available in these languages (and English).

Most countries offer language training for those needing it. In Bulgaria, for example, this is included in the education and training programme of the National Action Plan and can be linked to other training needs (e.g. digital). In France, language ability is assessed by the PES early in the registration process and appropriate training needs identified. French language courses adapted to a given professional need are delivered by a network of partners and there are also other possibilities for language training outside the PES environment.

A study on outreach in PES (European Commission, 2008) provides some further information on how PES target their ethnic minority populations. For example, out of the six-case study PES it covered, four (Bulgaria, Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden) targeted outreach services to some of their ethnic minority populations (many using peer-to-peer counsellors from the same targeted groups). However, it did suggest that there needed to be more focused support on women jobseekers.

3.5   People with physical or mental disability or health issues

While many PES customers with a physical or mental disability or long-term illness will be able to use mainstream digital services, there will be some who require specialist support if they are to be a fully inclusive part of the service offer. In Spain, the national PES (SEPE) website has a national award-winning version for blind or partially sighted customers which relays audio information. Also, through the INSUIT tool, navigation of the website can be adapted to make it more accessible for various user groups with particular needs, such as the partially sighted, and those with mobility issues in their hands and arms.

In France, customers with particular needs are taken into account in the delivery of PES services. A new service was launched in April 2020 on the PES website (called 'Rogervoice') to enable those with a hearing disability to use the telephone receiving written or sign

language transcriptions. Those with a sight disability are catered for by, for example, screen magnification and colour contrast adjustments and voice synthesis showing content on digital tool being used. There are also Braille options including notepads that can be used on the move which offer an array of services such as note-writing, emails and diary management.

In Slovenia, those customers who have difficulty with the mainstream digital services can be assisted through specialised counsellors in the PES and with support from specialist agencies as required.

3.6   Young people in remote/rural areas

Young people are more likely to have strong abilities in using IT, though this may be somewhat narrowly focused (e.g. mainly social media). Nevertheless, it provides a good basis for young customers to fully participate in the digital services of PES and there is no evidence among the case study PES of any special facilities for this group. Furthermore, the remote/rurality issue was not flagged up as one of concern.

In Bulgaria, the more remote areas are served by mobile labour offices, though since most young people needing support would fall under the Youth Guarantee, this requires an online application in the first instance. A similar situation prevails in Spain where applications for the Youth Guarantee must be done directly online, though this was relaxed slightly during the COVID-19 crisis to allow applications attached to emails. Furthermore, there is lots of information on PES support for young people on social media which is expected to be easily accessible for young people through mobile telephony.

In Slovenia, the even coverage of local offices throughout the country and good communications means that young people are unlikely to have problems in accessing services locally. Also, IT access and support are available in all educational establishments for those needing it – usually as a supplement to their own IT tools (notably their smart phone).

3.7   Other vulnerable groups

Three of the case study PES identified additional vulnerable groups that could be adversely affected by the increased digitalisation of services. These are as follows:

- France – unemployed over 45 years of age
- Spain – victims of gender violence
- Sweden – older adults and women, groups with higher proportions of those customers with worse prospects of finding a job.

There was little or no detail on how these groups are supported by the respective PES and it would seem that currently they are in most cases not subject to any special support to allow access to digital services. In Spain, there is some support by regional PES who assign a mentor to victims of gender violence and would normally regularly support them remotely, subject to compliance with any data protection considerations.

In the cases of France and Sweden, the issues flagged up appear to be related to older customers and this is likely to be linked to general abilities in the use of and access to IT. As such, their needs should be catered for under the more generalised support available such as IT training, support in local PES offices and partner organisations.

4.   Effectiveness of measures

4.1   External partnerships

The digitalisation of PES services is often part of a wider development of digital services instigated by government and, as such, bound up in the provisions set at a national level. In Bulgaria, for example, online services are delivered jointly with the State Agency for Electronic Governance and PES partners (such as employer and employee representative groups) participate in the implementation of the National Action Plan for employment, with mostly public sector partners helping deliver training in IT competence.

In Spain there is also a large role for government in the development of IT skills, with the institution for training those in employment (FUNDAE) working closely with the PES (SEPE) and the social partners at a national level and the autonomous regions. However, significant collaboration also exists with large IT organisations in the private sector (such as Cisco, Google and Microsoft – the '*Digitalizate*' initiative[6]) to offer free online training in digital skills for the unemployed and those in SMEs. The provision of digital training for young unemployed people is done through the Youth Guarantee programme and there is a special provision for women in rural areas to receive digital training as part of an initiative to tackle long-term unemployment ('*Reincorpora-T*' programme[7]). These are all in addition to the national employment system collaborating to provide online teaching of digital skills.

Other countries also harness the resources of other agencies in delivering the enhanced digital skills of PES customers. In France, after customers have had their digital skills assessed (through profiling) and their needs identified, training is offered through a network of providers and partners throughout the country. In Slovenia, there is established cooperation between the PES and government agencies and NGOs, with the latter, for example, supporting the language needs of migrants.

In Sweden, partnership with the public sector is seen as crucial and here the agency for digitalised government (DIGG) coordinates and supports the digitalisation of public services. This is supplemented by the PES cooperating with the Google Academy and other private sector organisations to deliver digital skills training. In the autumn of 2020, the new initiative '*Democratic Digitalisation*' will be launched with cooperation with municipalities and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities (SALAR). These developments all underpin a 'Digital First' approach in Sweden, though progress may be hampered by those without any form of e-ID, with protected identity/personal data, those with certain disabilities and those without a good standard of the Swedish language[8].

4.2   Monitoring effectiveness

All five-case study PES claimed to monitor the effectiveness of some, or all the PES measures taken to ensure all customer sub-groups have access to all PES services. Much of this is done through the normal channels such as regular customer surveys, carried out at varying intervals by PES. In Bulgaria, users of online services are encouraged to give their feedback via the website, particularly for the e-services such as jobseeker registrations, decisions on termination of registration, submission of applications for training and ALMPs, etc. More generally, PES would monitor the basic user statistics of

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[6] Further details are available (in Spanish) at: https://www.fundae.es/digitalizate.

[7] Further details of this long-term unemployment prevention initiative are available (in Spanish with English summary) at: http://www.sepe.es/HomeSepe/Personas/encontrar-trabajo/plan-reincorpora-T.html.

[8] The Swedish Agency for Participation 2020 estimates that 33% of those with a disability lack a mobile bank ID (the most common form of ID) compared to just 6% of those without a disability.

their online services such as number of calls to a telephone line, usage of websites and more detailed information on the channels within them.

The COVID-19 crisis has meant that in many countries PES offices were closed and customers were denied the option of face-to-face contact. In response, call centre staff and information about online services were expanded and the example from Slovenia (Box 5) shows that use of e-services grew substantially. For example, the proportion of online jobseeker registrations increased from 7% before the office closures to 49% at the height of the three-month closure, albeit during a significant increase in demand from those newly unemployed due to the COVID-19 crisis who may have had no other option but to use online services. However, when the offices reopened, e-registrations fell to 12%, but this was still well above the pre-closure figure. While it would suggest that most new registrants prefer face-to-face contact, when there is no alternative many reluctant users of e-services can manage to overcome their reluctance.

Box 5. Slovenia: Monitoring the effects of COVID-19 on digital services

The effects of the COVID-19 crisis on the use of digital services is evident in monitoring information from the PES in Slovenia. All PES offices were closed from March to May 2020 and new users of PES services were encouraged to register online as follows:

- PES registrations – from 7% before the crisis e-registrations jumped to 49% before falling back to 12% in June after the offices reopened;
- unemployment benefit registrations – from 4% before the crisis e-claims jumped to 41% in April before falling back to 12% in June after the offices reopened.

The usage data shows a distinct preference for face-to-face registrations and claims but also the possibility that a higher take-up of online options enduring after the crisis.

The disadvantages that PES customers can face due to a lack of engagement in digital services was highlighted by a survey from the PES in Sweden. It seems that many jobseekers are dissuaded by the 'uncertainties' of the digital environment and the pace of change in digital services. Information in Sweden also suggest that over four-fifths of those who do not use basic digital services are concentrated in those jobseekers with the worst job prospects. This was partly attributed to these jobseekers not receiving full information on job vacancies and support activities through, for example, the PES. It suggests that those not fully engaging in digital services may be excluded in those PES where the dematerialisation of services is extensive.

4.3 Strengths and weaknesses

The case study PES tend to view the strengths of their current approaches to ensuring access to services for all customer sub-groups in similar ways. For the majority of services, a blended (multi-channel) approach is appropriate if all customers are to be served well. This therefore tends to point to a customer-led approach where individual preferences are taken account of. For example, this is illustrated by the methods deployed in Bulgaria to reach those customers in remote/rural areas where mobile services are delivered onsite. It is also evident in the provision of physical places where customers can go to meet staff and use IT facilities when they are not available to them personally.

This is also the case in France where the emphasis is on supplementing online services with access to the PES and its delivery partners made available through a national network of public service centres offering a range of specialist services in a one-stop-shop approach. For those with IT skills needs, the digital voucher scheme has been judged a positive experience for jobseekers, giving increased digital confidence to many and with wider positive implications for their future job prospects. The emphasis on all these services is to have them available throughout the country and, for example, the aim is to complete

the network of public service centres by 2022. The IT training facilitated by the vouchers is dependent on a network of training providers throughout France and currently availability can be patchy.

In Spain, the suggestion is that the strong regional structure of the PES means that much more emphasis can be given to meeting local needs. This was evidenced by the telephone support services of the PES which have regional call centres rather than a national one. This means that call centre handlers are more familiar with the customer base and can also customise services better and support the work of the regional PES. The response to the COVID-19 crisis was judged a success in maintaining services with some staff working remotely and others onsite[9]. However, the case study highlighted the need to make more ALMP services available online as well as more customised solutions for vulnerable groups.

In Slovenia, the strength of the PES to deal with all types of customer is predicated on an evenly distributed network of local offices across the country and good internal communications where travel is required. It is accepted that some groups of customers (e.g. those with limited IT or basic skills) prefer the face-to-face contact with the PES, which probably extends to most customers given the rapid recovery in face-to-face contact following the reopening of the PES offices after the COVID-19 closures.

4.4 Main obstacles to ensuring full access for all customers

The most common thread running through the case study responses as a principal obstacle to ensuring access to all in the digitalisation process was a lack of adequate IT skills among customers. This was being tackled in different ways by the PES, mainly through the provision of IT training and this was most evident in France. Here the assessment of new registrants of their IT competences provided the basis for the early identification of training needs which was matched with responses such as the issuing of training vouchers that individual customers had some control over the use of. Some PES felt more inhibited in providing the necessary training, either through a lack of resources or, sometimes, a lack of interest on the part of the customer.

Another issue raised by the case study response was the more general problems in dealing with IT, such as the compatibility of various systems and compliance with the data protection legislation. In Sweden, where a 'digital first' policy was well established, there were issues with access to open data to help develop the digital services and which could inhibit what can be offered online. They also faced an obstacle with customers without an e-ID or with protected identity and personal data, with significant numbers among those with certain disabilities and with no proficiency in Swedish. In the energetic push for the dematerialisation of services, it can mean that some customers must rely on others to help them access services and this can often be problematic for the PES to accept this third-party validation.

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[9] The national PES (SEPE) had over 90% of staff still working during the COVID-19 crisis with around 58% working remotely and 42% office-bases. It estimated that this saved almost 8 million commutes to the office by staff.

5.   Future strategies

5.1   Future developments

There is no doubt that the dematerialisation of services will continue to develop and all PES are likely to be planning for this. In this process, it will be essential to understand the needs and preferences of all customers and respond accordingly with a service delivery model that reflects this. However, it does not mean that those customers with a reluctance to use digital services now, can have this reluctance assuaged through appropriate targeted policies to bring them into the digital delivery mode.

This perspective is evident in many of the PES case study responses. In Bulgaria, for example, the PES 'Strategy for Modernisation' is due in the fourth quarter of 2020, though the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 crisis may influence some of its content. This is likely to endorse the need for better services across the board, but especially in the digitalisation of services and accompanying measures to improve the digital skills of customers. The expansion of digital services in Spain will also be included in the 'Spanish Strategy for Employment Activation' (also due in the last quarter of 2020) which will see a plan for more investment in ICT, greater efforts at training in digital skills for jobseekers, employers and PES staff and management, and improvements in the telephone-based unemployment benefits service (RATEL). All this will be done with due regard to the requirements of any regulatory framework on data protection.

In France, the PES plans to further develop its partnership with agencies throughout the country and improve its offer to customers of digital skills training and upgrading courses. In Slovenia, the current multi-channel services model will have more emphasis on digital delivery and the customer journey through it, though it is recognised that this must come with greater efforts to raise the digital skills of customers if they are to benefit from it. Related to this there is an ongoing project to modernise services by improving the efficiency and user-friendliness of digital services, with a focus on better online matching tools providing more targeted advice on employment opportunities.

In Sweden, the PES is soon to embark on an EU-funded project – '*Democratic Digitalisation*' – that will provide a comprehensive review over a 30 month period of how the PES can ensure all customers' needs are recognised and served across the agency (see Box 6). The results of this project are likely to have wider applicability and will be of interest to all PES and could underpin a future cooperation in tackling the issues posed to some vulnerable customer groups as the dematerialisation of services continues[10].

Box 6. Sweden: 'Democratic Digitalisation' project

The Swedish PES is engaging in an EU-funded project from October 2020 to February 2023 with the goal of ensuring one agency which demonstrates a holistic responsibility for the customer regardless of how they are engaged with. It should ensure easy and quick navigation including:

-    digital first – customers should be able to easily self-access the ways in which they can take up the services they need;

-    inclusivity – ensure that no customer groups are excluded from accessing the services they need;

-    equal/equivalent - access to all services both remotely and locally.

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[10] In the course of its preliminary work for the project, the PES, through the PES Network, requested input from other PES and a summary of these were made available for this report.

The project will involve:

- production of a cohesive plan for how the PES can improve accessibility and ensure equal/equivalent service across the whole country;
- working together with the whole agency and keep together existing initiatives for a holistic perspective.

From the case studies, it is clear that all PES recognise that while the digitalisation of services will continue to expand, it is vital to ensure that all customers are kept onboard and for some time to come this will inevitably require a blended or multi-channel approach. Key to expanding digital services successfully is ensuring customers (including not just jobseekers but also employers and PES staff) have the skills necessary to make the most of the digital services. It is also clear that the PES are moving at different speeds in the digitalisation of services, which is good as this will allow for PES learning from each other.

More generally, the multi-channel approach to the delivery of services is set to continue, though the mix is likely to change. This was the view of one report (Pietersen, 2017) which identified a supporting relationship between the channels, concluding that: '*The telephone becomes more and more a support channel for online services and the richness of face-to-face interaction remains valuable to solve highly complex and ambiguous situations, for training purposes, and to build relationships*'. This underpins the concept of 'omni-channel management' where a holistic view of all the options should be considered and managed as a single unit.

5.2   Moving forward

In formulating ideas for consideration by PES in their dematerialisation of services, it is possible to highlight several key features that warrant serious consideration, and these are summarised below.

- The dematerialisation of services can bring about significant benefits for customers in terms of accessibility, transparency and ultimately inclusivity of provision, with associated benefits for PES such as reduced costs and more efficient job matching, along with wider societal benefits such as environmental (e.g. less travelling) and economic (e.g. more efficient labour market).
- The dematerialisation of services needs to be at a pace commensurate with the wishes and abilities of all customers. However, it must be recognised that they are not a homogeneous group and certain sub-groups will require special attention if they are to benefit from changes.
- The role of profiling new customers is key to the early identification of digital abilities and planning remedial training. But in this process, there must remain an element of choice for the customer and these preferences should be assessed on a regular basis (e.g. through customer surveys, counsellor feedback, etc.).
- Research has clearly shown that improving the digital skills of PES customers is key to better access to services. However, the opportunity to give jobseekers better IT skills has much wider potential benefits than just accessing PES service. It provides a transferable skill that will make jobseekers more job ready and attractive to an employer. As such, IT training should go beyond simple operational tasks to incorporate more complex generic aspects of learning, recognising this as a key skill.
- Improving the digital skills of PES customers can be tackled with a variety of delivery methods, as demonstrated by the five case studies. Some common elements include local delivery, flexibility to reflect the heterogeneity of the customer base, and how those acquiring the skills can use them afterwards (e.g. considering access to IT and the internet).

- There appeared to be significant variation in the support given to those PES customers who are non-native language speakers. There needs to an appropriate combination of online translated material and assistance from PES with interpretation when justified. However, support for the acquisition of the native language is the most effective approach since (like the IT training) it provides a generic skill that is sure to enhance their job prospects on the labour market.

- It is also evident that within PES all staff need to have a sufficient level of IT competence to enable them to help customers fully embrace the digitalisation of services. This was clearly recognised by some of the five-case study PES and formed an important part of their future strategy.

- Working with partners from the public, private and NGO sectors to deliver PES services was crucial in many PES. It was particularly valued in the digitalisation process in such aspects as IT training, provision of places where IT and the internet could be accessed and supporting certain customer sub-groups (e.g. those with a disability) with specialist staff. It suggests that the dematerialisation process is best achieved through a shared delivery system.

- The challenges posed by the COVID-19 crisis has seen many PES shift from a mostly office-based delivery (especially for first-time registrants) to a remote service using online and telephone/call centre approaches. While the reopening of PES offices has seen a significant reversion to face-to-face contact, this appears to be less than was previously the case. It suggests that many customers who were previously reluctant to use remote services, did so and have continued to do so. However, more information (e.g. gathered through a targeted customer survey) is likely to give more precise details of the experience of these customers and may show how any benefits can be capitalised on.

It is likely that there will never be a wholly digitalised service delivery in PES, but a carefully planned dematerialisation process can maximise the level of digital services within a multi-channel delivery system to the benefit of customer and PES.

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[11] Those references without a hyperlink are available on the PES Knowledge Centre.

Annex – Questionnaire for case study PES

Ad hoc study: Dematerialisation of services in EU PES – assuring full access to them for people with limited opportunities

Case Study Questionnaire

This ad hoc study 'Dematerialisation of services in EU PES' is part of the PES Benchlearning (BL) Research Programme for 2020. The topic was acknowledged as relevant and of interest to PES, especially in times of crisis, and aims to shed light on issues relating to unequal access to services due to such factors as technology problems, connectivity costs, place of residence, lack of digital skills, language skills, and the non-use of rights by citizens.

All PES to varying extents have progressed with the digitalisation of services, though mostly blended with more traditional face-to-face contact with customers through jobcentres (or their equivalent). However, the pace of change is accelerating and, in many PES, online services predominate.

For most users of PES services, this process has been relatively painless and can frequently offer better delivery such as speed of access to services and greater transparency in the range of support available. But success will to a great extent be judged on whether all users are able to interact with it. Inevitably there will be some customer sub-groups that may not be well-served by the changes in the methods of service delivery, such as those with limited digital skills, limited access to internet services, or those with certain disabilities that may require an enhanced approach to accessibility.

The principal aim of the study is to demonstrate how PES can reconcile the dematerialisation of services with ensuring accessibility for the more vulnerable customer groups.

Based on the secondary research inspired by the research questions, five PES were selected for cases studies, which showcase some experience in their approaches to the dematerialisation of services and how certain customer groups are accommodated.

Thank you for agreeing to contribute to this study. Your response will be central to understanding how the dematerialisation of services can avoid some PES customers losing out in accessing the services they need. Please provide as much detail as is needed to explain your approach.

Queries: For any queries that may arise while completing the questionnaire, please contact Kenneth Walsh at kenneth.walsh@icon-institute.de

Deadline: Please email your response to the questions as soon as possible and not later than **26 June 2020** *to* kenneth.walsh@icon-institute.de and copying to PES-BL-team@icon-institute.de*.*

A. Customer sub-groups needing special attention

Q1. To what extent are the following sub-groups of customers are likely to face difficulties by more services being delivered online:

(Please tick one option for each customer sub-group).

Customer sub-group	A great deal	Quite a lot	Some-what	Very little	Not at all
8. People living in remote/rural area	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. People with limited skills in IT or basic skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. People with poor access to IT equipment and internet	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Non-native speakers with language issues	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. People with physical or mental disability or long-term health issues	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. Young people in remote/rural areas	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. Other sub-group(s) – *please specify (add further rows as necessary)*	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Q2. Please describe the sorts of measures your PES currently takes to ensure the listed customer sub-groups have access to the full range of PES services as more services are delivered online.

(Please describe for each customer sub-groups relevant)

Customer sub-group	Description of the sorts of measures to ensure full access to PES services
1. People living in remote/rural area	
2. People with limited skills in IT or basic skills	
3. People with poor access to IT and internet	
4. Non-native speakers with language issues	
5. People with physical or mental disability or long-term health issues	
6. Young people in remote/rural areas	
7. Other sub-group(s)– *please specify (add further rows as necessary)*	

Q3. Are there any of these customer sub-groups that present special challenges in ensuring access to PES services as more services are delivered online?

☐ Yes

☐ No *(Please continue answering from question 4)*

Q3a. Please describe the nature of these special challenges and why they are difficult to address for each relevant customer sub-group:

(Please describe and use as many rows as necessary)

Customer sub-group	Nature of the challenges faced in ensuring access to PES services

Q4. To what extent do external (to the PES) partnerships in the public, private or voluntary/community sectors play a role in ensuring that all customer sub-groups have access to all PES services in the dematerialisation process?

(Please describe)

B. Monitoring effectiveness

Q5. Do you monitor the effectiveness of any/all the measures the PES takes to ensure all customer sub-groups have access to all PES services?

☐ Yes

☐ No *(Please continue answering from question 5)*

Q5a. Please describe what monitoring activities you carry out, how often and how the information is used:

(Please describe)

C. Effectiveness of the solutions (strengths and weaknesses)

Q6. If you have assessed the specific strengths and weaknesses of the various approaches used in your PES to ensure the different customer sub-groups, could you please give some details of your findings below for each sub-group?

(Please describe)

Customer sub-group	Details of strengths/weaknesses of approaches
1. People living in remote/rural area	

Customer sub-group	Details of strengths/weaknesses of approaches
2. People with limited skills in IT or basic skills	
3. People with poor access to IT equipment and internet	
4. Non-native speakers with language issues	
5. People with physical or mental disability or health issues	
6. Young people in remote/rural areas	
7. Other sub-group(s) – *please specify (add further rows as necessary)*	

Q7. Overall, how effective would you say are the measures your PES takes are to ensure all PES customers have access to PES services as more services are delivered online?

(*Please describe*)

Q8. What do you consider to be the main obstacles in your PES to ensuring that all customers have full access to PES services as more services are delivered online?

(*Please describe*)

D. Future strategies

Q9. Does your PES have a future strategy for ensuring that all vulnerable customer sub-groups will have full access to the range of PES services?

☐ Yes (*Please give details in Q9a*)

☐ No (*Please continue to Q10*)

Q9a. What future strategies are planned to ensure that all potentially vulnerable customer sub-groups have full access to the range of PES services?

(*Please describe*)

Q10. Please feel free to add any other comments related to online service provision and how access for all vulnerable customer sub-groups to all PES services can be ensured.

(Please describe)

Thank you.

Please email your completed

questions to:

kenneth.walsh@icon-institute.de
and copied to
PES-BL-team@icon-institute.de

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