

PERSONAL RETURN TO WORK BUDGETS' FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES: DEMAND-BASED DELIVERY OF RE-INTEGRATION SERVICES IN THE NETHERLANDS

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Abstract

The Dutch have implemented a new strategy – demand-based delivery of rehabilitation and employment services – in order to improve the return to the workforce of benefit recipients. People with disabilities who want to leave the benefit rolls and return to work may apply for a voucher known as a ‘personal labour re-integration budget’. This provides the responsibility, tools and budget to carry out a custom-made plan to acquire services for empowerment and to return to the labour market.

The article describes the background to the Dutch approach, initial implementation problems, favourable outcomes and subsequent nationwide application, which is also available for the unemployed and for persons on social assistance.

KEYWORDS: REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT SERVICES, VOUCHER PROGRAMMES, PERSONAL BUDGETS, RETURN TO WORK, EXPERIMENTAL PILOT AND NATIONAL IMPLEMENTATION.

1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning in the early 1990's, various reforms were made in sickness and disability benefit arrangements in the Netherlands with the aim of reducing the number of persons on disability benefits. These measures aimed to ‘smoothe’ vocational rehabilitation and employment programmes, create more flexibility in provisions, and improve co-ordination between the institutions involved in the delivery of benefits and re-integration into the workforce. A new

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element, introduced on a pilot basis in 1998, was the demand-based delivery of rehabilitation and employment services to persons with disabilities who want to return to work. These people may apply for a personal labour re-integration budget, or ‘voucher’, which gives them the responsibility, tools, and budget to design their own strategy and empowers them to acquire services that will enable them to return to the labour market.

The design, testing, implementation, and State-wide application of this approach took many years and met various challenges and obstacles, both at the administrative and the policy levels. Nowadays the provision of vouchers is considered a useful supplement to the existing repertoire of rehabilitation and employment measures.

This article sketches the background to the demand-driven approach in the Netherlands, the initial experimental programme, its implementation and impact, as well as the current programmes that are available to the various categories of benefit recipients. The final sections discuss voucher provisions from various theoretical, administrative and psychological perspectives because demand-based service delivery evokes risks and challenges that have to be dealt with. Administrators and policy makers in other countries who are also considering new directions in employment policies for persons on benefits may be able to learn from the Dutch experience.

2. A CLIMATE FOR CHANGE: GIVING DEMAND-DRIVEN SERVICE PROVISION A CHANCE.

- a. The introduction of the so-called ‘Personal Re-integration Budget’ (PRB) was inspired by two developments:
- b. positive experiences in the Netherlands with voucher programmes that were introduced in the early 1990’s in health care, particularly schemes that allowed for recipients to acquire daily home care during hours of their own choosing;
- c. ideas about demand-oriented service provisions, which in other countries led to the ‘Ticket to Work’ programme in the United States and Shower’s plans on vouchers for the unemployed in the United Kingdom (Shower 1994, Orszag and Snower 2000).

At the start of the pilot project in 1998, administrators, as well as public and private providers of vocational rehabilitation and re-employment services, had ‘mixed feelings’ about the feasibility and impact of vouchers. The main obstacles were considered to be the clients’ lack of insight into their competences and the needs of the labour market; their (alleged) lack of

skills to deal with (commercial) service providers; and the risk of abuse of the budget for non-employment purposes.

In contrast, client organisations, labour unions and some scholars were strongly in favour of an approach that gave more responsibility and power to the client. 'Traditional' programmes had modest success (measured in terms of placement rates) and clients were considered to be too dependent on procedures and the (sometimes understaffed) administrations. Advocates of vouchers criticised the dominant supply-side approach – the initiatives to take labour re-integration and supportive measures that were exclusively in the hands of intermediate professionals (in employment services or social insurance agencies). The intermediate professionals' choices were restricted to the existing repertoire of tools and rules for services, which were generally provided by well-known suppliers, whose services were governed by existing budgetary and eligibility regulations. The major criticisms of the supply-side approach are reflected in the literature and are as follows:

- a. Inefficiency due to the self-interest of professionals in awarding too many resources (e.g. Lane 2000);
- b. Destruction of the natural ability of people to be self-caring and self-supporting (e.g. Illich 1977a, 1977b) as a result of their dependence on professionals;
- c. The anachronism of supply-based delivery: public administration has general answers for various (target) groups of clients but these no longer match the current highly-individualised and emancipated society (e.g. Giddens 1998).

Demand-based delivery requires the transfer of tasks and duties from professional to the client. It follows that the client should be able to directly select the required provisions and procure the services and facilities that are needed.

3. MAJOR FEATURES OF THE INITIAL VOUCHER PROGRAMME.

In order to test the tools that could increase the employment of persons with disabilities, the Dutch government included personal re-integration budgets in the experiment. The major stakeholders involved – government, employment and rehabilitation agencies, service providers and municipalities – expressed their commitment to experimentation in order to see whether demand-driven labour re-integration was feasible and effective. A pilot project was created to find out whether and under what conditions a demand-based approach would 'work' better than the current arrangements.

The experimental 'Personal Re-integration Budget' programme aimed to assess:

- **At the client level:** the increase of responsibility, autonomy and activity, to

improve the client's work capacity and re-integration into gainful employment;

- **At the organisational level:** the improvement of flexibility and efficiency in the provision of vocational rehabilitation and employment measures.

The target groups consisted of disabled working adults and other (welfare) benefit recipients with health restrictions.

Initially two types of budgets were available: a *Standard Budget* of about €4,500, which was available for a maximum of one year, and a flexible '*Custom-tailored Budget*' with a maximum of €22,700 which was available when longer lasting services were needed. To qualify for the latter, clients had to send in a 'personal re-integration plan', describing their motivation, and identifying the services they needed to improve their position in the labour market. In keeping with the demand-driven character of the programme, the personal plan was only lightly checked by the agencies that usually initiated and decided training and employment measures. In principle, the experiment imposed no restrictions on the use of the budget, which could be used by the client for training, coaching, counselling, job searching, or self-employment. The pilot was implemented in three regions – The Hague, Utrecht, and Maastricht – each allowing a maximum participation of 150 clients.

4. EVALUATION AIMS AND SOURCES WITH RESTRICTIONS

Administrative restrictions, such as research and registration facilities and budgetary constraints largely defined the scope and content of the experiment. It focussed on process rather than on outcomes, and highlighted the developments and experiences of the programme rather than its effects. For budgetary reasons, a controlled experiment with a random assignment of clients to experimental and control groups was not feasible. The evaluation mainly aimed to assess:

- a. The ways in which the programme, which allowed a lot of freedom to the client, was implemented and operated;
- b. How far the programme contributed to an improved position for the client in the labour market;
- c. The consequences of 'empowered clients' in the market for providers of training, counselling and other re-integration and employment services;
- d. What could be learned from the pilot for (eventual) State-wide implementation of the voucher programme.

The pilot programme did not explicitly define 'success criteria', such as 'being engaged in gainful employment', but made use of 'soft' indicators such as evaluations by programme

case managers and self evaluations by voucher users. Consequently, interviews were held with pilot co-ordinators, and with case managers and supervisors in social insurance agencies and employment services, as well as with providers of vocational rehabilitation services. Client questionnaires at the point of intake into the programme and telephone interviews at the end of the pilot period were carried out. Finally, some basic administrative data collection was undertaken to gain insight into decisions on budgeting, the contents of re-integration plans, payment, processing time, and so on.

5. INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION PROBLEMS

The pilots had a slow start and initially faced various organisational problems. The information campaign to launch the pilots was rather restrained in order to avoid an abundance of applicants and, as a result, the recruitment and influx of clients was slow. Moreover, other priorities like organisational changes and intervening processes such as reforms in the organisation of disability benefit programmes restricted a full start. Furthermore, the municipality and the employment services did not participate actively, either because they already had been given new tasks to stimulate re-integration, or because they had restricted financial resources. Finally, although the existing structures of cooperation and coordination were used in two regions, a new organisational structure, which included the active participation of representatives of the client organisation in a 'steering group', had to be developed in the third region.

In the day-to-day operation of the pilots, some differences became apparent. The pilots differed considerably in their approach to the programme and in their and procedures, for example in regards to publicity, intake procedures, decision-making structure (centralised or decentralised) and in their way of monitoring the client's progress. Interviews with clients and case managers showed a number of variations and even shortcomings between the pilots:

- a. Internal and external *publicity* was insufficient and lacked a continuous basis: many clients and case managers at budget-providing organisations had to search for information on the programme, criteria and procedures;
- b. The *intake* of clients was often steered by active and/or passive selection criteria. Some case managers did not inform eligible clients about the new provision, as they did not

consider them as qualified for managing a voucher. Some personal re-integration plans were – contrary to the rules of the programme – rejected because they contained services that the client proposed to ‘buy’ which the case manager was not acquainted with;

- c. In their *application* procedures, several budget providers required a re-integration plan from all clients in disregard to the type of voucher they requested;
- d. Many clients needed *support* or advice or *support* in making their re-integration plan. Pilot regions differed regarding the degree to which support was provided: some consultants considered such help as opposed to the basic idea of the voucher programme (which emphasised the ‘autonomy of the client’) and refused it, while others helped the client to make their personal plan;
- e. *Decisions* on voucher requests often took from several weeks to months, although the eligibility test should – according to pilot rules – have had a minimum character. Confusion on criteria, lack of ‘internal’ information, as well as high labour turnover in case managers accounted for these delays (although, in the end about 90 per cent of all request had been accepted);
- f. Many clients managed to obtain the *services* they intended to have. Initially, budget-providing agencies hardly monitored the spending patterns and services acquired by the client, but later in the experiment these monitoring tasks were improved;

At the end of the *initial* 2001 pilot period, only about 200 persons had applied for a budget, and as a result the pilot project was extended twice. At the end of 2002 the number of clients in the project was 344, and 107 had completed their voucher programme.

6. CLIENTS AND BUDGETS

Clients making use of the experimental budget differed considerably from those in regular employment and re-integration programmes. Compared to these clients, the ‘personal budget users’ proved to be well-educated – there was an over representation of high school graduates those with higher education– partly due to self-selection and partly to selection by the agencies. As compared with other groups, the pilot participants included more people receiving a full disability benefit. Females and those with mental health-related disabilities

were also over-represented.

In the initial stage, two thirds of the clients received the ‘tailor made’ budget, which was on average €12,300 (those who made use of the ‘standard budget’ had on average € 4,100 to spend). The types of services purchased by the budget clients were similar to those used in the regular re-integration agencies. However, interviews indicated that the services themselves differed in significant ways from the regular services. They more ‘tailor-made’ and often quite exclusive. For example, a severely handicapped client succeeded in finding a teacher at her own residence, whereas she would have had to attend a regular educational institution in another city if she had been in the regular programme. Furthermore, clients using the voucher often aimed for quite ‘exclusive’ jobs – jobs that would never have been permitted to receive employment support if they had been in the regular re-integration scheme (e.g. to start a shop for/selling healing stones, or to work as a dramatherapist).

7. EXPERIMENTAL OUTCOMES AND INSIGHTS

Despite serious methodological restrictions, the final wave of interviews with clients and case managers showed that the budget programme had an *indirectly activating* role. It facilitated the use of training and employment services, by relatively well-educated clients, who may have not fitted into the regular services, procedures, and timetables. Budget users were shown to be well motivated and often had explicit ideas about what they needed to become employed. The majority of participants did not have high expectations regarding professional support by the regular re-integration services.

The experimental programme also reflected greater *flexibility*: some clients could now obtain services and provisions that they would not have received under the regular programmes and criteria. Labour re-integration services could now be tailored to the client’s wishes. The lack of rules gave clients the opportunity to evade bureaucratic obstacles in the existing schemes.

A follow-up analysis in 2003 showed that voucher users had characteristics that had been noted before: two thirds were female, almost 50 per cent were over 40 years of age, almost half of the clients had received higher education, and most clients received full disability benefits, mostly due to mental disorders.

In this analysis, about 41 per cent had completed the voucher programme and 40 per cent were still using it. From those who had exhausted their budget, 59 per cent had started gainful employment during or after the voucher programme, including 15 per cent who had stopped working again. Among those still using the voucher, at least 41 per cent started working before the end of the budget programme. If work resumption by those who dropped out of the programme is included, the work resumption success rate was 37 per cent. A comparison with work resumption rates of clients on unemployment and disability benefits in the regular re-employment measures and programmes showed that the budget users had a higher placement rate – 37 per cent versus 30 per cent in the regular scheme.

8. TOWARDS NATIONWIDE ENROLMENT

From January 2004 the voucher programme, with several changes from the original pilot, has been introduced State-wide. Each regional social insurance agency should now offer vouchers to people receiving full or partial disability benefits. Due to the relative success of this approach, persons on unemployment benefits were also allowed to request a budget.

The next section presents and discusses the major differences between the experimental pilot and the national programme. The national programme, now called 'IRO' (literally: 'Individual Re-integration Agreement'), has become quite popular: as of April 2006 about 39,000 budgets have been provided. Only 2.4 per cent of requests for budgets have been denied. In the same time period, 150,000 regular re-integration programmes have been applied. Some features of the utilisation of the IRO include:

- The majority of users are the unemployed (68 per cent);
- Compared to the clients making use of the 'regular' rehabilitation and re-employment services, where administrators make the individual plan and negotiate with service providers, there are no longer differences in age and gender distribution of voucher users compared to non-voucher users;
- 43 per cent in the unemployed category and 25 per cent in the disability category of budget users have a higher education;
- There are no differences, regarding age and gender between the IRO-clients and the regular programmes; although clients with low education levels seem to be a little under represented.

Finally, the ongoing monitoring, which aims to assess the processing, expenditures and outcomes of the IRO voucher programme shows that the personal budget-related expenditures are about 10-40 per cent higher than the expenditures per client in the regular (supply-based) programmes. On average the voucher budget costs €4,535 (VAT excluded); whereas regular programmes amount to € 3,865. However, placement rates in regular employment are 20 per cent to 80 per cent higher than for clients using the regular programmes. The most recent monitor report concludes that not only clients and their organisations but also administrators and case managers (or employment service providers) have a positive opinion on the programme.

Finally, those on social welfare have an opportunity to request a budget and organise

their own labour re-integration path. Since 2004, municipalities have been able to provide vouchers to their social welfare clients, who have often experienced the greatest difficulty in returning to the labour market. The use of vouchers by social welfare recipients is still in an early stage: some municipalities offer them on an experimental basis, others as a regular provision. In 2006, twelve municipalities carried out a benchmark project to compare implementation procedures, design of business practices and organisational structures and initial experiences. The early stages of implementation for this category of clients do not allow for conclusions but assess the target group's effectiveness and feasibility.

9. INTRODUCTION OF SUPPLY-BASED EMPLOYMENT PROVISION: RISKS AND LESSONS

Before discussing the implications of voucher-based services, we summarise some mature features of the voucher delivery models developed in the Netherlands. Table 1 covers some basic elements of the three models regarding clients, process and organisation.

Table 1 Major features of voucher models developed in the Netherlands

Dimensions	Experimental Voucher Programme	Current Voucher Programme (IRO)	Current Voucher Programme (PRB-municipalities)
Eligible groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - persons on full or partial disability benefit - unemployed with health restrictions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - persons on full or partial disability benefit - unemployed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - persons on social welfare
Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more client responsibility and autonomy - increase client's work capacity - more flexible and efficient service delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - more client responsibility for return to work - return to sustainable employment - more efficient administration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - increase client responsibility - return to sustainable employment
Personal plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - client develops plan and sends in - many clients: need personal advice - marginal eligibility test of plan by social security agency - client selects service provider and buys services according to plan - initially: no strict supervision by social security agency; from 2002: progress report every three months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - client chooses (private) labour re-integration agency - this agency advises client and develops plan in collaboration - evaluation of plan by social security agency. - labour re-integration agency provides services (education, training, job search) or buys on behalf of client - labour re-integration agency supervises, administers and reports to social security agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - variations: - client develops plan (with or without support from welfare service or coach)
Maximum Budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - initially two budgets: standard (€4,500) and flexible: no maximum limit - extended exp.: one budget: €3,600 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - € 5,000 (or €7,500 when large distance to labour market) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - € 5,000 (but variations)
Maximum duration spending budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - initially: standard: one year, flexible: variable - final version: one year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - two years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - varies (up to two years)
Payment conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - full payment of providers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a 'no cure, less pay' system whereby they get 50 per cent: at the start of the programme and 50 per cent when job placement occurs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - varies: full payment, or sometimes 'no cure, less pay'.

Reviewing the development of the Dutch voucher programme evokes several questions about the legal and administrative characteristics of the programme. This section is devoted to addressing these questions and is grouped into four major topics: the new responsibilities of the client; the normative risks involved in the fundamental change of service provision and the ways they have been solved; the demands on administrators who give away power to the client; and practical implementation problems.

9.1 THE ROLE OF THE EMPOWERED CLIENT

Demand-based service delivery implicates the transfer of various tasks and roles from the administrator to the client. The new roles of the client in a voucher programme include:

- a. *The arranger role*: this role includes various tasks, like self-diagnosis (competencies and needs assessment), selection of interventions to meet the demands and design of a programme with measures and provisions. The client is considered competent where they are entitled to identify their own needs and decide how to meet the aims of the programme (e.g. employment). This autonomy is not absolute: the client may ask for advice from experts (e.g. employment consultants) as long as this is within the targets and conditions of the programme. Consequently, the client is responsible for achieving the aims of the programme.
- b. *The consumer role*: whereas in supply-based service delivery, the administrator (case manager) arranges the provision of the right services, in the voucher approach the client carries out the programme: They make choices of provider, and negotiate and buy the interventions or provisions included in the individual programme. The client and the provider create a so-called quasi market (Le Grand and Bartlett 1993).

It may be concluded that a voucher programme implies serious changes in the distribution of responsibilities between the client, the provider and the programme administrator.

9.2 VOUCHERS AND PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL POLICY

Programmes aiming to provide social support and social integration are generally based on some basic principles which govern the goals and the ways in which they are administered. In social policy theory (see Gilbert and Terrell 1998; Goodin 1988; Goodin *et al.* 1999). the

principles of equality, adequacy and equity can be discerned. What can be said about ensuring these principles in demand-driven service delivery, where the client has more power than in the traditional models?

Equality

Several theories have been developed about the principle of equality and social policy. In general this principle can be defined as the guarantee for each citizen to have the same opportunities and the same duties concerning the execution of certain rights. In supply-based approaches to labour re-integration, the intervention of the agency-professional guarantees equality in the delivery of re-integration services. In demand-based re-integration, the role of the intermediate professional is eliminated or at least highly reduced. Individual clients have to secure their own rights and fulfil their own duties. To comply with the principal of equality, it is necessary that every client can count on support to fulfil their role as the 'arranger' and 'consumer' in the market for re-integration services. This support entails information about re-integration and employment opportunities, as well as information about suppliers of employment and re-integration services and about the services themselves. On the other hand, this support may be found from personal coaching and feedback from an independent re-integration expert.

Adequacy

It is important for the individual client, and for tax-paying society, that the client's re-integration plan is adequate, meaning that it results in securing employment within a reasonable time. In the regular supply-based practice, the principle of adequacy is achieved through the intervention of the agency-professional. Eliminating the role of the agency professional implies that the client is competent to find their own way in the labour market. Since the competence of the clients cannot be absolute, they must have the opportunity to seek professional support in designing an adequate and realistic re-integration plan and in purchasing the most adequate services and products. They may also need information about the way that service providers do their jobs and some knowledge of the success-rates of the providers.

Equity

The third principle is equity. In general we can say that a person can apply for social support if it is in proportion to the contribution they have made to the system. The principle of equity is mostly applied to the costs of social provision. The services the client receives must be as efficient as possible. By linking the costs of demand-driven provision to those of supply-based provision, the risk of inequity can be prevented.

In order to comply with the three basic principles referred to above, it will be necessary to arrange individual support and information provision for all clients who use a demand-based instrument, like a voucher or personal budget. They could then choose whether and how to use these tools. Since we know that the market will fail to initiate the development of these tools, central government or local authorities will need to provide this support. Otherwise, the shift towards a demand-based labour re-integration system may have an adverse effect on the effectiveness of the system.

9.3 ADMINISTRATORS AND DEMAND-DRIVEN SERVICE DELIVERY

Both of the monitoring reports on the experimental stages of the IRO voucher programme showed that the principal paradigm shift creates a number of problems for administrators:

- there was a loss of power to actors who had traditionally been seen as dependent;
- there were doubts about the competencies of clients concerning ‘what is good for them’ and which tools and labour market needs had to be accounted for;
- there was the fear of a loss of tasks and work if the voucher programme was successful;

The consequences included:

- the slowly growing willingness of clients to take part;
- the important role of opinion leaders / good practices;
- large variations between administrators, and large regional differences (also still observed in 2006).

Administrators changed their attitudes and business practices to meet the needs of administering the voucher programme as a result of:

- information policy, motivation and education of staff;
- the development of new guidelines and instructions; and
- new working procedures.

Nevertheless there were still complaints about the waiting period for decisions on the plans that were submitted.

9.4 IMPLEMENTATION LESSONS

The Dutch pilot studies showed that the implementation of a demand-based delivery system within a ‘traditional’ public service administration has to be well prepared, both in a technical and in a strategic way.

The technical problems are concerned with the implementation of vouchers in the legal provision of social security benefits and rehabilitation programmes. A voucher system that is contrary to the ‘regular’ scheme does not (automatically) achieve the support of case managers and their institutions; they have to step backwards. The active support of service providers is particularly important to let professionals promote the budget and inform potentially eligible users.

The strategic problems are concerned with a change of mentality. The professionals and institutions providing the budget and monitoring the client, and the clients themselves, must be convinced of their competences in arranging their own ‘return to work path’. For that reason a strategic implementation plan, which supports clients and administrators ought to contain the following elements

- monitoring and, if necessary, adapting the day-to-day implementation process;
- raising awareness and providing information to potential clients, budget providers and others (through the internet and through client organisations);
- providing for the possibility of clients being supported in making their re-integration plans; and
- communicating ‘examples of good practice’ among providers and coordinators.

10. CONCLUSIONS

The Dutch experiences with the development and introduction of a demand-based programme using a personal re-integration budget enable us to draw a number of conclusions.

First of all we have seen that a considerable proportion of beneficiaries are able to design their own re-integration plan and were successful in fulfilling this plan. Most of them showed that it was neither possible nor desirable to do this all on their own. The move to a demand-driven system requires an infrastructure of individual support and the provision of information to facilitate clients to become the arranger of their own plan and to an effective consumer in the market for re-integration and employment services. With this infrastructure it will be possible to allow clients to design and execute an adequate and cost-effective re-integration plan.

Secondly, we can see that the implementation of a demand-based system takes time. After eight years, clients, government, programme administrators and service providers are only now starting to learn how to deal with the possibilities and weaknesses of this voucher-programme.

Since we know the positive rates of placement into employment, we may conclude that, at least for a substantial proportion of benefit recipients – recipients of unemployment, social welfare and disability benefits and services– a personal re-integration budget can be a means of finding their own way back into the labour market.

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