Employer engagement in active labour market programmes: the role of boundary spanners

Abstract

The involvement (or engagement) of employers is critical to the success and effectiveness of active labour market programmes (ALMPs), yet little is known about how street-level organizations (SLOs) delivering them interact with employers. This article draws on interviews with 'employer engagement' staff in SLOs contracted to deliver the UK's principal ALMP, the 'Work Programme'. Conceptualizing these staff as 'boundary spanners' who operated both within SLOs and at the physical boundaries between SLOs and employers, the study found that their day-to-day work involved three key types of activities. The study found that their day-to-day work involved three key types of activities. Firstly, initial business-to-business 'sales' approaches to employers; secondly, a complex process of matching of clients to employers' requirements through *intra*-organizational interactions; thirdly, the building and maintenance of trusting *inter*-organisational relationships with employers. The strategies and tensions revealed emphasise the under-explored, but critical, role of inter-personal dynamics, both within and at the boundary of SLOs, in the aim of assisting people into employment.

Keywords: street-level organizations, active labour market programmes, employers, inter-organizational relations, boundary spanner

Introduction

Active labour market programmes (ALMPs) aim to move people without jobs into employment. A wealth of literature in both social policy and public administration has analyzed the policy design and implementation of ALMPs, including a focus on 'street-level' or frontline work (Lipsky, 2010; Brodkin, 2011). However, street-level research has, to date, not focused on the active approaches of street-level organizations (SLOs) to employers, or the role of 'employer-directed' services (van Berkel, 2017: 15). It is only recently that a relatively small number of scholars have begun to study the critical role of 'employer engagement' in the success of ALMPs (see Bredgaard, 2017; Bredgaard and Halkjær, 2016; McGurk, 2014; Lambert and Henly, 2013; van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012; Ingold and Valizade, 2017; Ingold and Stuart, 2015). The concept is itself ill-defined and has tended to be used interchangeably with terms such as 'employer participation' and 'employer involvement' in relation to government employment and skills initiatives (van Berkel et al, 2017: 505). van Berkel et al (2017) define it as "the active involvement of employers in addressing the societal challenge of promoting the labour-market participation of vulnerable groups" (p.505). Ingold and Stuart (2015) have argued that employer engagement has two 'faces': employer involvement with ALMPs and providers' necessary engagement with employers to enable this, emphasising the critical role of SLOs.

This article focuses on 'employer engagement' as a novel area of frontline work that has not yet been studied systematically. In the article, employer engagement staff in SLOs are conceptualized as 'boundary spanners' (Williams, 2002) who operate both within their own SLOs but also, critically, at the physical boundaries between their SLOs and employers. The article draws on interviews with private and not-for-profit providers of the UK's principal ALMP, the 'Work Programme' (WP) (2011-2017). The WP provides a valuable case for

exploration of this under-examined dimension of frontline work that can provide a basis for further scholarship in this area. Following the introduction of the WP, the UK is one of the countries that has gone the furthest (aside from Australia) in its marketization of employment services (Caswell et al, 2017: 186; Greer et al, 2017). There are programme data (ONS, 2017) concerning the number of WP clients who moved into employment via the programme. However, there are no data regarding the actions, attitudes or behaviour of front-line staff within WP SLOs (Sainsbury, 2017: 57), particularly in terms of the mechanisms whereby they introduced clients to employers. This article illuminates the activities of these boundary spanners.

The study found that the boundary-spanning work of employer engagement staff involved three key types of strategies. Firstly, their initial approaches to employers largely involved business-to-business 'sales'. This was followed by a complex process of matching of clients to employers' needs through *intra*-organizational interactions with advisors and clients. Finally, their work involved the building and maintenance of trusting *inter*-organizational relationships with employers. The article argues that the strategies in which employer engagement staff as 'boundary spanners' engaged, to a large extent, mimicked those of private recruitment agencies. However, they were constrained by tensions between the localized practice of employer engagement within highly centralised governance and contracting arrangements, together with the twin, but conflicting, policy goals of swift labour market insertion ('work first') and 'sustainable employment'. The strategies and tensions revealed emphasize the under-explored but critical role of inter-personal dynamics, both within and at the boundary of SLOs, in the aim of assisting people into employment.

The next section provides the theoretical background to the study, taking as its point of departure the street-level bureaucracy literature, before focusing on the literature on inter-organizational relations (IORs) and on the relevance of the concept of 'boundary spanners' to this area of frontline work. The methods for the study are then presented, followed by a description of the governance context of the WP. The findings are structured into three sections focused on the strategies undertaken by employer engagement staff. This is followed by a discussion of the findings and a conclusion.

Theoretical background: Employer engagement as inter-organizational relations (IORs)

Martin (2004) has largely linked differences in employer involvement in ALMPs in Britain and Denmark to the institutional level, as the regulatory context for the social relations which take place between organisations. In their political-organizational analysis of employer participation in social policies, Martin and Swank (2012) viewed institutions (in particular, quasi-institutional employer representative associations) as pivotal in constructing and reproducing employers' social policy preferences. However, as Blois (2002) has argued in relation to business-to-business relations, the processes involved cannot be explained by focusing upon institutional and governance structures alone. Analyzing dimensions relating to employer engagement in ALMPs therefore necessitates conceptual tools that can adequately capture the dynamics of the partnerships and relationships between the organisations involved. Lindsay et al (2014: 193) have argued that, although public management theory has been preoccupied with *intra*-organizational and systemic processes, in reality contemporary public service delivery is *inter-organizational and interactive* (Lindsay et al, 2014: 193; emphasis in original). In this context, organizational action needs to shift

from *intra*-organizational imperatives to the building of *inter*-organizational capacity and forms of organization and governance that are designed around collaboration, partnership and networking (Williams, 2002: 105). Firstly, this reflects the increasing recognition that many 'wicked' social policy problems with multiple causes are too complex for one organisation alone to address. Secondly, in the context of this study, it reflects the trend towards the contracting out, or '(quasi-)marketization' of public services, with the aims of increasing efficiency, effectiveness and promoting innovation. As discussed in the next section, with the introduction of the Work Programme (WP), delivery of ALMPs in the UK became the preserve of a multiplicity of largely private sector providers. These providers are street-level organizations (SLOs) that "do the work of the state" Brodkin (2013: 18) and mediate between the institutional and individual levels of policy. The increasing multiplicity of organisations involved in ALMPs exposes a significant gap in knowledge about the activities and processes involved in employer engagement, in particular the role of inter-organizational relations.

The literature on inter-organizational relations (IORs) is vast and encompasses a range of disciplinary perspectives, characterized by a "cacophony of heterogeneous concepts, theories and research results" (Oliver and Ebers, 1997: 549). IORs occur when two or more organisations transact resources (money, physical facilities and materials, customer or client referrals, technical staff services) between each other (Van de Ven, 1976: 25). They involve resource dependency, including information flows and mutual expectations between actors (Ebers, 1997). In the context of employer engagement in ALMPs, SLOs are dependent upon employers to give opportunities to clients on their caseloads. In turn, SLOs intend that, to some extent, employers become dependent on their services and labour supply, preferably

on an ongoing basis. Employing the concept of IORs recognises that policy implementation is diffuse and can take the form of policy networks (Rhodes, 1997), or 'network governance' (e.g. Damgaard and Torfing, 2010), as well as partnerships for policy delivery (Rummery, 2002). Greer et al (2017: 160) have argued that network governance sits uneasily with ALMP marketization but partnerships - as intermediate forms of organization and hybrids between 'market' and 'hierarchy' (Williamson 1975; Powell and Exworthy 2002) – have historically played a role in ALMP delivery. The UK New Labour governments (1997-2010) mandated the formation of certain partnerships, including 'New Deal Partnerships' of public, private and third sector actors led by the public employment service (Jobcentre Plus), and private sector-led Employment Zones (see Lindsay et al, 2008). There have also been partnerships of a more voluntary nature between labour market intermediaries and employers (see McQuaid et al, 2005). Marchington and Vincent (2004: 1032) have argued that, although institutional forces (such as government regulations) provide a framework for IORs, by themselves they do not determine the precise shape of them. Instead, IORs are produced and reproduced within organizations and articulated through localized practices (Marchington and Vincent (2004, 1036; 1046) and institutional and inter-organizational forces cohere at the point of inter-personal exchange (Marchington and Vincent, 2004: 1032). This leads us onto consideration of the role of employer engagement staff as 'boundary spanners'.

Employer engagement staff as 'boundary spanners'

Williams (2002) has argued that, although a critical dimension of inter-organizational work is the building and sustaining of effective relationships at the inter-personal level, the IOR literature has tended to ignore the agency of individual actors in terms of their skills, ability

and effectiveness (pp.106, 115). The street-level bureaucracy literature has usefully focused on the critical issue of how policies are 'enacted' and affected by the 'discretion' and 'agency' of 'street-level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010). For example, street-level studies of ALMPs have focused on the interactions between frontline advisors and their unemployed clients (Ulmestig and Marston, 2015; Østergaard Møller and Stone, 2013). In terms of quasi-marketization, van Berkel (2014) has highlighted the 'double' impact of governmental monitoring of performance on both provider and client behaviour. Fuertes and Lindsay (2016) have examined the contradiction between 'personalization' (assumed to be a 'by-product' of quasi-marketization) and the paradoxical standardization of frontline practice. However, to date 'employer engagement' as a dimension of frontline work in SLOs has not been examined (van Berkel, 2017: 15) and the concept of 'boundary spanners' is a helpful way of theorising the work of these street-level actors.

Boundary spanners operate at the (physical) 'interface', or periphery, between their own and partner organizations and their day-to-day work requires the building of networks and partnerships with individuals in organizations outside their own. Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011: 21-33) suggest that boundary spanners work across different types of boundaries. These include: vertical boundaries such as levels, ranks, seniority, authority and power; horizontal boundaries in terms of functions, units, peers and expertise; stakeholder boundaries such as alliances, networks, customers, groups, governments and communities; and geographic boundaries involving distance, locations, cultures and regions. For boundary spanners, participation in collaborative exchanges with individuals in other agencies and organisations is pivotal in realizing both their personal and organizational objectives (Williams, 2002: 106-7). As such, they do not merely operate at the organizational level but

at the inter-personal level via networking activities between individuals (Williams, 2002: 110). Through day-to-day relationship-building and operations activities, boundary spanners are involved in developing partnerships (Noble and Jones, 2006: 897).

Williams (2013: 20-21) has argued that in their day-to-day interactions, boundary spanners embody a number of roles. Firstly, a 'reticulist' role relating to the management of relationships and interdependencies through a range of competencies, including inter-personal relations and the maintenance of networks. Secondly, an 'entrepreneurial' role that involves the development of new solutions to complex problems, opportunism and innovation and coalition building and deal brokering. Thirdly, an 'interpreter and communicator' role, involving collaboration through an appreciation of different cultures, motivations and practices. The skills and competencies of boundary spanners are not necessarily professional or knowledge-based but rely on relational and inter-personal attributes (Williams, 2002: 106) that assist them in building networks and relationships. Critically, boundary spanners lack direct authority over other partners (Williams, 2002: 117) and need to engage others through collaborative encounters involving understanding, valuing and the management difference (Williams, 2013: 21; 115).

In their day-to-day work, boundary spanners encounter tensions in attempting to foster trusting relations with others outside their organization, while at the same time needing to protect their own organization (Marchington et al, 2004). In their day-today work, boundary spanners are required to make careful judgements regarding the balance between benefits and 'disbenefits' for their own organizations and in this endeavour they arguably need to be 'hard-nosed', rather than altruistic (Williams, 2002: 117). Two key examples in relation to

ALMP delivery are relevant here. Firstly, the recognised issue within quasi-marketized ALMPs of 'creaming' and 'parking of clients. In the former case, attention is focused on the most 'work-ready' clients; in the latter, time, energy and resources are not directed towards clients who are perceived to have substantial barriers to work (Carter and Whitworth, 2015: 279; Finn, 2008). In quasi-marketized ALMPs, both of these attempts to 'game' the system are driven by the aim of maximising financial rewards for moving clients into employment. These are then translated into SLOs' own performance targets, including at the level of individual client advisors and employer engagement staff. Although creaming and parking has been recognised internationally as a significant issue for ALMP delivery, employers' perceived or actual needs for labour are either implicit within it, or overlooked. However, employers' demands for labour are central to ALMP delivery and to their success. Furthermore, they are critical to the discretion exercised by staff when deciding whether to invest in interventions to assist clients into work, or to promote them to employers. Examining the day-to-day activities of boundary-spanning employer engagement staff sheds light on this critical issue.

A further overlooked, or over-simplified, issue that impacts on employer engagement is the theoretical 'matching' of labour supply to labour demand (Bredgaard, 2017; van Berkel and van der Aa, 2012). Since the 1990s, ALMPs (including in the UK) have been based on a supply-sided orthodoxy (Peck and Theodore, 2000) that overlooks the crucial dimension that, in order for ALMPs to meet their objectives (i.e. increase job outcomes and employment), they are dependent upon the actions of employers. Concomitantly, the processes that underpin, and the power relations that impact upon, the matching of labour supply and demand have also tended to be overlooked. In addition to the dominant supply-side approach and the demand-side approach relating to employers, Bredgaard (2017) identifies the 'matching'

approach, which aims to match labour supply to labour demand. It is in this space that SLOs as labour market intermediaries (Ingold and Valizade, 2017) can act as conduits between employers and individuals looking for work. Consequently, the processes whereby employer engagement staff attempt to actively engage employers are critical.

Based on a study in the Netherlands, van der Aa and van Berkel (2014) have argued that SLOs can appeal to employers as 'clients' or as 'co-producers'. In the former case, SLOs operate as 'full service companies', akin to high-street recruitment agencies, and employers' satisfaction with ALMPs depends on the degree to which their demands are met (van der Aa and van Berkel, 2014: 14, 23). In the latter, SLOs do not merely focus on adaptation to employers' demands but, instead, employers become partners in implementation and in the mutually beneficial aim of supporting disadvantaged groups into employment. This is akin to co-production, which allows various actors with differing needs from policies to collaborate in their design and delivery; there are examples of this within ALMP delivery (see Lindsay et al, 2018; McQuaid et al, 2005; Salognon, 2007). van der Aa and van Berkel (2014: 16, 24) argue that the active involvement of employers as co-producers of ALMPs, rather than merely as clients, can increase their willingness to be more flexible about their demands but caution that not all employers are interested in, or able to act as, co-producers, or to adapt their demands. What is missing from these analyses is a focus on the actual strategies and activities of employer engagement staff in their attempts to engage employers. This study aimed to explore this in the context of the UK Work Programme and the next section introduces the methods employed.

Methods

The study comprised 34 in-depth and semi-structured qualitative interviews with employer engagement staff from street-level organizations (SLOs) contracted to deliver the Work Programme (WP) in England, Scotland and Wales. Considine et al (2015) have provided comprehensive, longitudinal data on the activities of frontline staff in the UK, the Netherlands and Australia. Although it would have been plausible to administer such a survey to gather data on the activities of employer engagement staff, the exploratory nature of this research informed the decision to select the interview method.

Interviews were undertaken with 19 employer engagement staff from Prime contractor SLOs (the next section describes this context in further detail) and 15 from sub-contracted SLOs. The sample was purposive and representative of the geographical coverage of the WP. It was constructed on a snowballing basis through existing contacts and through further network-building. The research was approved by the institutional research ethics committee and adhered to British Sociological Association research guidelines. All participants were provided with a detailed information sheet and consent form in advance. The majority of interviews were conducted in person in a location of the participant's choice (usually their workplace) and a small number were undertaken by telephone. Interviews lasted on average around forty-five minutes and most were recorded and transcribed in full. In a small number of cases participants did not feel comfortable being recorded and in such cases comprehensive field notes were taken. The central research question explored in the interviews was 'How do SLOs engage employers to secure 'sustainable' job outcomes?' The interview schedule covered the following themes: (i) their organization's employer engagement strategy and operations; (ii) their day-to-day role and activities as employer engagement staff; (iii) how they specifically

sought to engage employers; (iv) the perceived barriers to employer engagement; and (v) the

perceived factors that facilitated employer engagement. The interviews were constructed as

two-way active conversations (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 141-2), using the topic guide as

a starting point for participants' contributions. Due to the exploratory nature of the research,

the data were coded using Nvivo, based on themes emerging from the data, rather than

imposing themes in advance.

The following section illustrates the governance context in which SLOs operated. This is

followed by the findings from the study, focusing on three key types of activities of employer

engagement staff. Firstly, their initial approaches to employers as business-to-business

'sales'; secondly, their *intra*-organizational interactions with client advisors and clients; finally,

their *inter*-organizational relationships with employers.

Governance context: the UK Work Programme

Taylor et al (2016: 258-60) have delineated three key phases in the contracting-out of

employment service delivery in the UK. Firstly, an emergent field in which service delivery was

'opened up' to a proliferation of contracted providers (1997-2006). Secondly, consolidation

of the field, which became increasingly dominated by contracts with large 'Prime' providers

and a shift towards outcome-based funding (2007-2010). Thirdly, contraction of the field,

involving a further shift towards awarding of contracts to large Prime providers who could

accommodate the financial risks and sufficient up-front capital required by a Payment by

Results (PbR) model (2010 onwards). During the latter period, the 'Work Programme' (WP)

was introduced by the UK Coalition government (in 2011) as a 'flagship' ALMP, replacing all

New Deal programmes from the New Labour period (1997-2010). Aside from minimal initial referral and attachment fees, SLOs delivering the WP were remunerated only when they moved unemployed clients into 'sustained' jobs, with payments graded according to the length of time they remained in employment (DWP, 2011). Providers operated under a 'black box' approach, with little prescription from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) that oversaw the policy and contracts. A key intention underpinning the WP was that services would be personalised and tailored to promote employment outcomes, in the process stimulating innovation (DWP, 2011; Fuertes and Lindsay, 2016). At the eligible point in their unemployment period, long-term unemployed individuals, young unemployed and disabled people assessed as 'fit for work' were referred by the public employment service (Jobcentre Plus) to a contracted provider and remained with them for up to two years. England, Scotland and Wales were divided into 18 'Contract Package Areas' (CPAs) circumscribing geographical areas for WP delivery. In each CPA there were at least two 'Prime' (or 'lead') contractors (three in larger metropolitan areas), resulting in 39 Primes in total who competed against each other to move their clients into employment. Within each CPA, Primes constructed their own supply chains of SLOs to deliver the programme at two tiers of delivery. Within 'Tier 1' Primes could deliver 'end-to-end' services through a mixture of direct delivery and sub-contracting arrangements, or act as 'managing agents' and entirely contract out delivery. Tier 2 largely involved 'call-off' contracts, with no guaranteed client volumes; non-profits tended to be involved at this tier as 'specialist' SLOs.

Greer et al (2017: 19) have argued that the British ALMP market structure empowered private providers by giving them centralized control both over the market and in devising their own services. The former can be observed from the fact that all except two of the 18 Primes were

private for-profit and largely multi-national companies and the WP contract cemented Primes' direct relationships with central government. However, the state also played a role in 'market-making' by setting the context for providers to tender for contracts. For example, some WP Primes were new to the welfare to work sector, others were new to the geographical areas in which they delivered the WP and, in effect, existing providers (particularly non-profits) were edged out of WP delivery. The activities of SLOs were also governed by the state in terms organizational performance measures. The following sections further illustrate how this was enacted in the everyday practices of employer engagement staff, beginning with their initial approaches to employers.

Approaching employers: business-to-business 'sales'

All interviewees had employer-facing roles in their SLOs and were part of dedicated employer engagement teams. Almost half of the sample (18) had previously worked in private recruitment agencies; a further 15 had worked in other roles within welfare to work or related services (in the public, private or third sectors) and six had previously worked in corporate relations or sales. Considine et al (2015) have highlighted that, over time, client advisors in Australia, the UK and the Netherlands have reduced their contact with employers. This could be a result of the increasing prominence of staff and teams within SLOs to manage contacts and relationships with employers, which interviewees in this study emphasized marked a significant shift from previous ALMPs. These teams and corresponding job roles were usually named 'employment engagement' but were also referred to as 'sales' or 'business development'. Larger SLOs with more WP contracts tended to have employer engagement teams that operated at the national level, liaising with large employers to broker relationships

and providing strategic direction to regional and local level employer engagement teams to manage these relationships. At a local level, SLOs had differing organizational strategies and structures for engaging employers. Due to time pressures resulting from large caseloads of at least 150 clients per client advisor, most SLOs considered it impractical and too 'reactive' for client advisors to contact employers. In smaller SLOs, business development teams were tasked with employer engagement but frontline advisors were also expected to engage with employers on a day-to-day basis. However, regardless of the organisational structures, interviewees considered it crucial that advisors and employer engagement staff worked in close contact with each other, employed 'two-way communication' and regularly liaised about clients on their caseloads and employers' vacancies.

Across the different SLOs, employer engagement staff attempted to engage employers across different geographical boundaries (local, regional and national) (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011) but the spectrum of services offered was consistent across the sample. A distinction could be made between services that encouraged employers to engage as 'clients' and those that fostered their engagement as 'co-producers' (van Berkel and van der Aa, 2014). The former included recruitment-related services, such as sifting applications for vacancies and screening candidates to save employers' time and costs, as well as allowing employers to use SLOs' premises for interviews. The latter included the co-production of information sessions, assessment days and pre-employment training with specific employers. Additionally, other recruitment-related services were offered that differed in the extent to which employers engaged as clients or as co-producers. These included brokering guaranteed interviews with employers, arranging 'working interviews', work trials and work placements that, firstly, allowed clients to obtain 'realistic job previews' of workplaces and jobs and, secondly,

permitted employers to assess candidates over a longer duration than conventional interviews allow. Once employers had recruited clients, SLOs also offered in-work support.

Employer engagement staff with a sales or business development background felt that their initial approaches to employers constituted business to business ('B2B') marketing and that their aim was to 'sell' their 'products' (clients) to employers (see also Considine, 2000).

> "It is like selling a product, I probably shouldn't say it, but the guys that we have on board, our clients, are our products. We have to do an ROI - a Return on Investment - and that's the way I do it when I do my employer engagement" (Prime)

This was also reflective of an 'entrepreneurial' role (Williams, 2002; 2013) in terms of the brokering of deals. However, others felt that a 'hard sell' approach was not necessarily successful with employers and that more persuasive skills were required to convince them of the quality of candidates, as well as the quality of the service that they offered:

> "it's just all about selling myself, it's selling me as a person and me as an account manager in terms of managing that" (sub-contractor)

Those with a recruitment agency background considered that their roles in SLOs had similarities with those of recruitment agency staff. A key difference was that employer engagement staff offered a 'free' or - the preferred term - 'cost neutral' recruitment service to employers that could result in potentially significant savings in recruitment costs:

"It's the whole fact that we can take the load off them, so when we initially meet with that employer we find out what their needs are and we can really do the process from start to end for them. They might advertise a job and they might get hundreds of applicants, but we can go through them in our centre. What we offer is tailored" (sub-contractor)

Given that few employers were familiar with the WP, or the services offered by SLOs (Ingold and Sturt, 2015; Ingold and Stuart, 2014) employer engagement staff needed to set themselves apart by providing a convincing 'offer' to employers through their localized practice (Marchington and Vincent, 2004). In this endeavour they competed with other SLOs in the supply chains of their own and competing Primes, as well as with high street recruitment and training organizations. To initiate first contact with employers, employer engagement staff employed fairly standard 'sales' techniques evident in private for-profit organisations (including recruitment agencies), such as cold calling in order to set up face-to-face meetings. Targeting the decision-maker responsible for recruitment in an organisation was critical, pointing to the importance of the reticulist role (Williams, 2013; 2002). Networking and inter-personal skills were important in order to overcome employers' barriers and concerns and to gauge their propensity to engage in the WP (see Bredgaard, 2017):

"and you have to do it as a sales person because that's what I am, identify the problems and overcome the barriers that they're coming up with to say that we can deliver a better service, and talk about my experiences" (sub-contractor)

For employer engagement staff across the different SLOs, their approaches to employers tended to be the same in principle, however there were nuanced differences in respect of business size:

> "my approach would differ dependent on the level that I am going in to talk to. If I'm going in to meet with a business owner, they may only have 20 minutes so I need to be short, sharp, to the point, how am I going to get them the right person, and what money is available to them to create this new role. A larger organisation we may need to sit down and look at how we feed into their current recruitment strategy or how we meet their corporate social responsibility" (Prime)

This section has illustrated the dominant strategies undertaken by employer engagement staff, in order to initially engage employers in the WP. These reflected business-to-business sales tactics and also reflected an entrepreneurial role, as well as the role of reticulist (Williams, 2002; 2013). The next section examines the activities that occurred once contact with an employer had been established.

Intra-organizational relations: working with frontline advisors and clients

Having made contact with employers, for employer engagement staff the next stage of the process was to establish employers' requirements and to interpret them, in order to match clients on their caseloads to available jobs. Staff needed to have the ability to listen and to understand employers' businesses and requirements and to translate that into an appropriate offer for employers, reflecting Williams' (2013) 'interpreter' and 'communicator' roles.

Employer engagement staff tended to adopt one of two approaches to sourcing vacancies from employers: (i) 'client-led' - finding jobs to match caseloads; and (ii) 'employer-led' - sourcing available job vacancies and trying to fill them. Some viewed the former as insufficiently employer-focused and unrealistic because it could mean preparing clients for jobs that did not necessarily exist, or for vacancies that employers could easily fill through existing recruitment methods (thus reducing the attractiveness of their 'sell'). However, the latter approach could neglect the needs and capabilities of clients and result in difficulty in filling employers' vacancies. Employer engagement staff therefore attempted to balance the differing needs of clients and employers (Williams 2002). In relation to employers, their approach largely focused on 'intervening' in employers' recruitment and selection processes, such as by sifting their client caseload to offer employers 'suitable' candidates who were more likely to be recruited. In terms of clients, this involved the provision of interventions in order to make them more employable, often tailored to a specific employer:

"the reason why we're intervening, and at an employer level, is to get as much information from the employer so that when we do get people forward, it's not 20 people where only two are suitable. It's one or two people who are definitely suitable" (Prime)

As the previous section highlighted, in terms of their initial approaches to employers, employer engagement staff considered it crucial that they worked in close contact with client advisors. This was described as a 'triangular' relationship between employer engagement staff, employers and clients, similar to Forde's (2001) model of recruitment agencies,

employers and clients. This also reflects the crossing of horizontal boundaries highlighted by Ernst and Chrobot-Mason (2011):

"…it's the advisors that have got the customers…I couldn't do my role if it weren't for the advisors. I go to the advisors and say 'Right I'm looking for this kind of person. Give me some nominations, who have you got'. And then they'll dish me a load of CVs and I'll meet with those individuals" (sub-contractor)

Employer engagement staff viewed the WP as an improvement on previous programmes, in relation to the longer duration of contracts with the DWP (5-7 years) and the incentivization of 'sustainable' (ongoing) employment, rather than payment when clients commenced work (and usually at a maximum six-month point). However, there was a significant tension between the aspiration of providing appropriate services for both employers and clients on their caseloads and the 'work first' underpinning of the WP. For employer engagement staff, a critical dimension of the matching process was discretion regarding which clients they sent to employers, reflective of their reticulist role in exercising strategic judgement (Williams, 2002; 2013). Consequently, the WP and its PbR model could dis-incentivize investment in clients as the potential costs to providers of 'bad' products were decreased financial rewards for the SLO, less repeat business from employers and potential 'tarnishing' of their SLO brand. This tension is illustrated by the following quote:

"I've got a person there right now who meets what the employer's after. And I know this person [in front of the advisor] needs a job, but if I put that person in front of an employer are we going to lose the employer and potentially ten more jobs this year?

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You become a bit hard being an employer account manager because you've got to balance what's going on" (sub-contractor)

A critical constraint on the activities of employer engagement staff delivering such a work first programme was the context of the jobs available, compounded by the increasing availability of insecure, temporary and 'zero hours' (call-off) work (see Lambert and Henly, 2013). Employer engagement staff thus needed to balance the tensions of their SLO's performance targets and the needs of employers. This tended to result in a focus on the quickest labour market re-insertion for the client, underpinned by the idea that 'any job is better than no job', provided that the client was deemed suitable for the role and for the employer, and that the SLO could keep them in employment. If the job was not the clients' preferred one, it was incumbent upon employer engagement staff, in conjunction with their advisor colleagues, to persuade the client to take up the job opportunity. This complex management of requirements and relationship management is illustrated by the following analogy:

"I can go out, with my fishing rod and with my net and today I've brought these jobs in, I've brought this fish in. You wanted tuna, I've only got plaice, haddock and snapper today. You've got to choose one, because that's what's available today, so which one would you like? But you know tomorrow, or somewhere down the line when you're employed, you can still look for the one you want, and my phone's still on" (sub-contractor)

This section has further elaborated the complex process whereby employer engagement staff matched and prepared clients for employers' requirements. This involved both reticulist, and

interpreter and communicator roles (Williams 2001; 2013). The findings also underscored the interdependence of the *intra*-organisational relationships with both client advisors and clients within their SLOs and their *inter*-organizational relationships with employers at the boundaries of their SLOs. The next section explores further how this latter process was managed through on-going relationships with employers.

Managing relationships with employers

The first section relating to business-to-business sales highlighted the different structures for employer engagement within SLOs. However, regardless of the size or structure of the SLO, or the size of the employer, interviewees emphasised that relationships with employers were brokered and managed at the local level, pointing to the inter-personal dimension of IORs (Marchington and Vincent, 2004: 1032):

"Employer engagement is about relationship-building" (sub-contractor)

"It's about the personal relationship rather than a business one" (Prime)

As the section on business-to-business sales highlighted, interviewees compared their employer engagement roles with the activities of recruitment agencies. However, in terms of their ongoing relationships with employers, a key difference between SLOs and recruitment agencies was the involuntary and limited nature of the caseload (Lipsky, 2010: 28). The following quote illustrates how this affected their service to employers:

"the service that we offer is very similar in terms of finding the right person for that job. Saying the right person, I would say finding *the most suitable* person that we have available to us for that job. Because there is a difference...We will find who we feel is the most suitable within our caseload of job seekers" (Prime)

A critical aspect of the PbR funding model of the WP was the withdrawal of upfront financial rewards for providers, based on the assumption that, under a black box approach, they would invest their own funds in preparing customers for sustainable work and gain a 'return on their investment' down the line. However, arguably the 'work first' nature of the WP resulted in employer engagement staff focusing on client employability in relation to specific job vacancies, rather than on broader measures of employability. This relied upon signals from employers about the likelihood of them offering opportunities to SLOs' clients. The risks inherent through reliance on the engagement of specific employers had to be balanced with the potential financial rewards for their SLOs, sometimes leading to a reluctance to invest in clients prior to placement:

"We don't want to be offering too much up-front when we're not 100%, you're assuming that employers have always got the best intentions, but we don't want to be going through both resource, time and effectively cost implications of running stuff...A lot of the things we do, if there is a cost implication involved, in terms of actually paying for a course or paying for some uniform or paying for a product for example, we would look to have a job offer before we would do that" (Prime)

Interviewees' accounts of their relationships with employers again accorded with Williams' (2013; 2002) reticulist role in relation to the building and management of (inter-personal) relationships. Given the voluntary nature of employer engagement and, in the absence of formal contracts or agreements, there was no guarantee that employers would recruit candidates that SLOs had prepared for their vacancies. This again marked a key difference from the recruitment sector, in that employer relationships were largely built on trust, rather than on a contractual basis (Sako, 1992). Building relationships of mutual trust with employers was essential for the repeat business on which SLOs relied to move their clients into work and the communicator aspect of their role was important in fostering this (Williams, 2013):

> "you can have a really good relationship with an employer then the trust is there and they will often say yes, we'll work with you and we'll come to you first. It tends to be a much more informal relationship rather than a contractual relationship that you would see perhaps where money is involved" (sub-contractor)

In their management of relationships with employers, employer engagement staff felt that they needed to embody a range of behaviours that were similar to those noted by Williams (2002) as critical for boundary spanning agents. A friendly demeanour and the ability to convey the 'human stories' about clients was considered to be important and they needed to be 'people-people' who could build relationships and a rapport with employers. Good customer service skills were important, including the ability to follow up with employers, particularly when a placement had not gone as planned. Employer engagement staff also needed to be persistent and to be able to cope with refusal.

For employer engagement staff, their reticulist role involved not only working to build and maintain relationships with employers but also across stakeholder boundaries (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011: 26-28) with organizations within and outside their own Primes' supply chains. These included housing associations; local authorities; third sector organisations; training providers; employer associations, networks and forums; and the public employment service (Jobcentre Plus). Some (predominantly larger) SLOs developed partnerships with skills providers to offer training and qualifications, utilising other public funding streams separate to the WP. This relationship-building was critical for SLOs who were new to ALMP delivery, or who were delivering services in new geographical areas. In their attempts to engage employers, some employer engagement staff competed directly with companies' on-site recruitment agencies, while others partnered with them to offer candidates for their existing vacancies. This suggests a further entrepreneurial dimension to their role. Additionally, there were examples of vacancy-sharing with competitor SLOs, when the risk of not filling an employers' vacancies was judged to be greater than the risks of sharing them with competitors. However, interviewees also expressed frustration that sharing of vacancies with other SLOs (either within or between supply chains) was often not reciprocated.

This section has illustrated the day-to-day activities in which employer engagement staff engaged in order to build and maintain relationships with employers and with other individuals outside their organizational boundaries, reflecting both entrepreneurial and reticulist roles (Williams, 2002; 2013). Critically, the management of ongoing relationships with employers involved the building of trusting relationships through inter-personal relations (Marchington and Vincent, 2004: 1032).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has analysed the roles and activities of employer engagement staff within street-level organizations (SLOs) delivering the UK's principal active labour market programme (ALMP), the Work Programme (WP). In particular, it has analysed the experiences of employer engagement staff trying to make a success of the programme at the localised level of practice by initiating contact with employers through: (i) business-to-business sales tactics; (ii) *intra*-organizational relations with clients and with client advisors; and (iii) *inter*-organizational relationships, largely with employers, but also with other SLOs, both within and outside their own supply chains for delivery.

The findings suggested that employer engagement staff embodied a number of critical boundary spanning roles outlined by Williams (2002; 2013). Firstly, in relation to their initial approaches to employers, employer engagement staff focused on identifying the decision maker responsible for recruitment, reflective of the reticulist role. However, in general their initial 'sales' approaches to engaging employers - from cold calling and overcoming initial objections and barriers - were principally entrepreneurial in terms of the development of new solutions to complex problems, coalition building and brokering of deals. Once contact with an employer had been established, employer engagement staff then needed to ascertain employers' labour requirements and match and prepare clients for them. In so doing, they interacted with client advisors, clients and employers in a nuanced process that informed their decisions around which clients to invest in and direct towards specific employers that went beyond theoretical matching and creaming and parking. At the same time, employer

engagement staff also needed to convince clients of the benefits of applying for a particular job, or of working for a specific employer. Finally, the management of ongoing relationships with employers and with others outside their organizational boundaries involved the building of trusting relationships at the inter-personal level (Marchington and Vincent, 2004: 1032), reflective of both entrepreneurial and reticulist roles.

The study revealed some specific tensions in the localized practice of employer engagement. Firstly, although there were distinct similarities between the everyday work of employer engagement staff in SLOs and that of recruitment agencies, in their approaches to and ongoing relationships with employers, the former were constrained by the individuals on their caseloads. Secondly, they were constrained by the job opportunities offered by employers. Wright (2012: 323) has argued that supply-sided ALMPs require frontline advisors to coerce 'potential workers' to fit with employers' preferences, regardless of existing and 'intractable' labour market inequalities. This is underlscored by the fact that in this study employer engagement staff lacked any authority over employers (Williams, 2002: 117) and that employers held a position of monopsony power. In this respect, they had no less power than recruitment agency staff; the key difference was that their relations were based on trust rather than on contractual relations (Sako, 1992). Thirdly, there was a clear tension between the 'work first' ideology of the WP that required employer engagement staff to work with employers and clients to ensure swift labour market insertion and the performance measurement and financial rewards that were intended to incentivize sustainable employment (Brodkin, 2013: 26). The work first dimension ultimately won out, although this was delicately balanced with the need to maintain ongoing relationships with employers, to promote repeat business and to avoid 'tarnishing' their reputations with them. A further

tension related to a degree of confusion regarding who was their customer – the employer, the unemployed client, or the DWP. In the interviews, the term 'customer' referred to clients. In effect, who employer engagement staff considered to be their main customer reflected the differing aspects of their roles at specific points in the employer engagement process. It was also reflective of how their activities operated across different types of boundaries, particularly horizontal boundaries within their organizations and geographical and stakeholder boundaries at their periphery (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011). However, for employer engagement staff, ultimately employers were their key customer. 'Employer-oriented' approaches that aim to influence employers' willingness to hire or train (van der Aa and van Berkel, 2014: 13) were largely absent from the activities of employer engagement staff in this study and modifications tended to occur largely in relation to managing the expectations of unemployed clients regarding jobs.

This article has illuminated the interactions of employer engagement staff within this under-explored area of frontline work (van Berkel, 2017: 15) and, in so doing, it adds to an emerging literature regarding employer engagement in ALMPs. One aim of quasi-marketization is to introduce into public service delivery logics that are purported to be inherent in the private sector. The data suggest that the strategies undertaken by employer engagement staff delivering the WP had similarities with the private recruitment agency sector but they were not necessarily specific to the programme, or to the quasi-marketized context of ALMP delivery. However, the strategies and tensions revealed by the study emphasize the under-explored, but critical, role of inter-personal dynamics, both within and at the boundary of SLOs, in the aim of assisting people into employment. As such, the study has implications for our insights into IORs and the role of boundary spanners in a variety of organizations

delivering ALMPs, including the public employment services, local welfare agencies and private and non-profit organizations. van der Aa and van Berkel (2014: 25) have rightly argued that successfully striking the balance between the interests of unemployed individuals and employers is the greatest challenge for further development of 'demand-oriented' ALMPs. Future research should further explore how employer engagement staff manage the differing needs of stakeholders on a longitudinal basis, particularly in terms of improving the progression and retention of unemployed clients (Sissons and Green, 2017). It could also usefully explore employer engagement in different institutional and political contexts to that of the UK, including through mixed method and comparative analyses. Ultimately, it is critical that future studies include employers as perhaps the most significant 'upstream' actors (Wright, 2012: 312) in the recruitment of disadvantaged labour market groups.

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