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Reorienting companies' hiring behaviour: an innovative 'back-to-work' method in France

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Abstract : Current 'back-to-work' programmes, particularly in France, tend to be built on a concept of personal responsibility for (long-term) unemployment and follow an 'adaptive' approach: improving the 'employability' of the unemployed, which is seen as an individual capacity, independent of the work and evaluation context. Our contribution justifies an alternative approach to back-to-work initiatives, so that society's share of responsibilities for long-term unemployment and social exclusion is taken into account within a collective, emergent and context-related conception of employability. Our study is based on observation of an innovative back-to-work programme in France (IOD) which seeks to change employers' assessment and recruitment practices to help vulnerable candidates who are generally discriminated against when seeking work. This interventionist approach aims to alter the demand side of the labour market and bring about changes in companies' practices to encourage more stable jobs and reduce selectivity in hiring.

Keywords: back-to-work policies, employability, employers' evaluation methods, interventionist approach, long-term unemployment, labour quality, recruitment

1. Introduction/issues

The issue of getting people into or back to work, known in French as '*insertion*', came to prominence in France in the mid-1980s in response to the structural nature of the unemployment problem and its corollary, high growth in long-term unemployment, which is now over 40% of total unemployment (source: INSEE, French National Statistics Office, Attal-Toubert and Lavergne, 2006: 2). Specific measures were introduced, then gradually reinforced and extended to tackle long-term unemployment which, like a kind of 'scrapheap', appears to offer no hope of re-employment unless an extremely large-scale economic recovery occurs.

Although it may not be possible to derive a general explanatory theory from recent arguments in economic literature concerning long-term unemployment (Fougère, 2000), the research stresses individual determinants perceived as the cause of personal unemployability (Salognon, 2005): the strategic behaviour of the unemployed in the theory of job prospecting (Mortensen, 1977; Devine and Kiefer, 1991), deterioration of human capital as the period of unemployment increases (Pissarides, 1992; Coles and Masters, 2000), duration of unemployment itself (Jackman and Layard, 1991 ; Machin and Manning, 1999), or *ex ante* heterogeneity (Lockwood, 1991; Decreuse and di Paola, 2002). All in all, economic analysis of long-

term unemployment has been restricted to the division between employable people and the rest, with companies having no role to play in the construction or destruction of employability but simply selecting already employable candidates. Quite logically, the recommendations derived from these theories solely concern adjusting jobseekers' employability - understood in its broad sense as the aptitude to find and keep a normal job - to 'format' and fit it to employers' requirements. These latter are considered as data to which the jobseekers must adapt themselves (Gazier, 2001).

The current systems are broadly based on a conception of individual responsibility for unemployment, in which the unemployed person's individual characteristics - demographic (sex, age, nationality, family status), socio-economic (training and qualifications, duration of unemployment) and/or behavioural (discouragement, passive nature) - are considered to underlie their current situation. They take an 'adaptive' approach which involves adapting offer to demand in the labour market and mainly targets the unemployed person: in France (Seibel, 1998), getting long-term unemployed back to work is achieved by improving their 'employability' (training, from 'qualifications' to 'rebuilding motivation'), or through hiring incentives designed to compensate for their 'unemployability' (subsidised contracts in the commercial sector, creation of jobs in the non-commercial sector). These measures are based on two common principles (Simonin, 2003): long-term person-centred intervention; and individually-tailored contract-based relations between the public authorities and the beneficiary. Since the late 1990s, under the influence of international institutions such as the OECD, reference to 'job activation' has become increasingly widespread, inciting jobseekers to accept any job that comes along (Simonin, 2003). Meanwhile, as illustrated by the 'Back to Work' Plan (*Plan d'Aide au Retour à l'Emploi, PARE*), treatment becomes part of a 'general context of increasingly individualised measures' (Castrà and Valls, 1997, p. 99, my translation): designed coaching and boosting jobseekers to make them 'competitive' on the labour market. However, too much focus on individuals and their drawbacks may generate even more stigma.

It is very difficult to assess the efficiency of these measures and their impact on the structure of unemployment (Seibel, 1998), but it would appear that, as opposed to courses focusing essentially on training, the closer they come to a real job situation, like subsidised contracts in the commercial sector, the more they create an employment relationship between the company and the jobseeker that fosters a permanent return to work (Reynaud, 1993). We can therefore think that acting on worker's employability is not the most efficient approach and that financial incentives appear to cause employers to look beyond their prejudices against the long-term unemployed. However, candidate selection inevitably works to the detriment of the most disadvantaged jobseekers (Join-Lambert *et al.*, 1997). 'Cherry picking' takes place in a contradiction whereby equal allocation of resources within the target population does not prevent the 'most employable' unemployed from being the primary beneficiaries of the systems (Gazier, 1999). Moreover, the end of a subsidised contract is a highly difficult time, as there is frequently no recognition of the experience acquired and stigma may be attached to having worked under such a contract (Simonin, 2003).

In accordance with traditional analyses of long-term unemployment which do not examine the question of the evaluation of skills – assimilated to data –, this adaptive logic implicitly assumes that employers are perfectly capable of evaluating job candidates and immediately adopting rational recruitment methods that lead them to reject the applicants who are indeed the least useful for the company. Society's responsibilities, particularly the role of employers and their selection processes, are ignored. Nevertheless, if we think about theoretical researches integrating qualitative uncertainty, then we understand that labour quality is not a pre-established natural datum. Considering incomplete and asymmetric information about quality (of goods and labour), Akerlof (1970) and in his continuation Stiglitz (1987) show that the heterogeneity of goods prevents the market behaviour (until disappearance), as soon as the variation of quality is not always observable by the agents. The quality is then dependent on the agents' action; it is no more a natural datum but becomes a socially constructed variable (Orlean, 1991). Thus, there are different ways of assessing labour quality. This context of qualitative uncertainty challenges the evaluator's rationality. In this respect, the results obtained by Simonin (2000, p. 11), which showed that 40% of individuals had no interviews during their unemployment period, can be interpreted in two ways: *i*) the intensity of their job-hunting efforts is too low (and the system may keep it this way); *ii*) certain jobseeker profiles never progress beyond the CV-sending stage and are always eliminated before getting the opportunity of being assessed in an interactive situation. This second interpretation reflects the 'unemployability scrapheap' concept (Benarrosh, 2000) that means there are several ways of evaluating labour quality and some act primarily as barriers to employment access.

According to the French '*Economie des conventions*' school, recruitment in the labour market involves an intertwined dual-level choice (Larquier and Salognon, 2006): on the first level, it is the choice of the selection criteria for certain candidates rather than others; and this choice implies a value judgement of what makes a 'good candidate' on the second level. The term 'labour quality convention' is used for one of many possible ways of evaluating and classifying the worker. Although on the first level, any evaluation criterion can serve equally well for selection, measuring labour productivity based on qualifications or the results of psycho-technical tests or interviews do not all give the same outcomes. These measurement tools relate to different quality conventions, involving different consensual mental images associated with the notion of a 'skilled' labourer and giving rise to use of certain criteria to select 'good' workers. This selection takes place in a 'situated rationality' context: the labour quality evaluation devices belonging to the evaluator's environment (CV, application letter, psycho-technical tests...) focus his/her attention on a few features deemed as discriminant.

Evaluation processes vary depending on the quality convention adopted (between companies and countries, over time), and work as principles of inclusion/exclusion. Based on a typological construction of quality conventions (inspired by empirical works of Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal, 1997), Larquier and Salognon (2006) show that putting the emphasis on *personal skills* rooted in the individual (as measured by psycho-technical tests), or *work skills* (as shown in the CV) examined away from direct contact with candidates, contributes to a longer period of

unemployment. These quality conventions contain a conception of universal employability and its corollary, permanent unemployability, which is a source of social exclusion: if all recruitment processes begin by selection of CVs, it is always the same people who are denied the chance of assessment. In return, the local nature of any local judgement emphasising *emergent skills* in an interview or *distributed skills* in a network gives the worker a chance, by negotiation, of being assessed differently in each 'test'. Negotiating skills locally can prevent long-term exclusion: candidates' employability is neither inherent to the individual, nor permanently fixed; it encompasses a local, interactive and emergent nature.

In this respect, the comparative analysis by Marchal and Rieucou (2003) of the assumptions underlying candidate selection, based on advertised job vacancies, shows that since 1980 French job advertisements have been shifting towards an ever-more detailed description of the required criteria (rather like profiling), particularly personal qualities. This reflects higher demands plus systematic distancing of candidates (selected via examination of CVs and application letters), to the detriment of face-to-face encounters. Such pre-selection appears particularly common in France, and it is the least qualified, or those whose skills are not immediately apparent from a CV, who are the primary 'rejects'. The severe imbalance in the relationship between the recruiter and the applicant works in the recruiter's favour, depriving the candidate of any negotiating power in the recruitment process. British job advertisements, in contrast, do not give a detailed profile of the candidate and leave room for face-to-face meetings, attributing less importance to preconceptions.

The actions of company managers and labour market intermediaries require attention, with critical examination of their assessment of job applicants. On the one hand, looking beyond the mutual obligations of the public authorities and the unemployed, the factor of employers' responsibilities should be introduced, as the evaluation conventions adopted in assessing job applicants contribute to social exclusion. If this responsibility is acknowledged, it follows that back-to-work policies must be redirected towards employers. On the other hand, the conception of the role of the back-to-work mediator depends on identification of responsibilities for certain dysfunctions in the labour market. If it is accepted that qualifications and employability are not universalisable but emerge in work situation – once unemployed, a person cannot display the skills used in a real working situation (know-how, capacity to work and integrate into a team, autonomy, etc) as there is no formalisation and therefore no recognition of these valuable 'qualifications' – pre-selection by distancing the candidate and emphasising their personality traits becomes irrational. This claim runs counter the occupational psychology research which points to the predictive validity of pre-selection by tests but joins another research by psycho-sociologists which has established that the 'employability scores' of low-qualified jobseekers (based on a conception of individual and universal employability) are not predictive of subsequent chances of employment; however, *'their commitment to concrete labour market-oriented behaviour appears to be the best predictor of entry into work'* (Castra and Valls, 1997, p.100, my translation). The possible rationality of pre-selection in terms of direct search costs is counterbalanced by its irrationality in terms of indirect matching costs. Successful matching cannot be through measures designed to make hiring unemployed candidates more competitive, but implies

collective coordination towards changes in employers' evaluation and recruitment methods: so that a candidate deemed 'unemployable' can, under a different evaluation method, become the right candidate to fill the vacancy. Questioning the rationality of companies' evaluation modes suggests that the logic of public intervention, presently centred on the supply-side, should be in fact based on the firms' practises.

This type of interventionist approach is applied by an innovative 'insertion' method (IOD: Intervention on Offer and Demand) which is developed locally in France by a non-profit association called Transfer. This method is based on two assumptions, which are congruent with our theoretical approach:

- An emerging and collective conception of the notion of employability, as a social construct that is dependent on both theoretical context (the product of beliefs and representations) and practical context (employability is constructed and reflected in a real-life work situation).
- The exclusion of vulnerable people does not result from rational behaviour by employers, but 'over-selection' processes built on social stereotypes.

The IOD method turns the reasoning on its head. It no longer develops back-to-work aid campaigns clearly-defined and structured around the difficulties - not to say handicaps - suffered by the unemployed in order to have them fit to the requirements of the labour market. Instead, it considers employers' recruitment practices as determinant in the success or failure of the process for getting people into jobs. The last idea should be in keeping with the literature about the negotiation of 'psychological contracts', which represent the mutual beliefs, perceptions and informal obligations between an employer and an employee; and which could have major influence on employee attitudes and consequently on the success of the job relation (ROUSSEAU, 1995). The crucial IOD issue is to implement levers - for instance a quick access to work and a major role attributed to the mediator - to limit over-selection by companies (which is irrational) and to bring about changes in employers' assessment methods and practices. The aim is to make work more accessible to the least qualified and most vulnerable groups (those on *RMI* income support, the under-25s, and the long-term unemployed), avoiding 'cherry picking'.

The objective of this paper is to show and analyse the proximity (of hypothesis and insights) of our theoretical approach to long-term unemployment, focusing on labour demand and challenging employers' practices, with this practical back-to-work experience. The main research question is to determine the extent and how it is possible to reorient companies' hiring and integration behaviour for the efficient return to work of long-term unemployed. This comprises three concerns: *i*) clarifying alternative principles which underpin the IOD method; *ii*) how to actually negotiate the workers' employability (tactics used); *iii*) what is the impact of this negotiation on getting a vulnerable population back to work?

To answer these questions, we will use files produced by the association Transfer, to explain and analyse the intervention principles behind the IOD method, and the empirical data described below.

2. Research methodology and presentation of the fieldwork

The exercise here involves supporting and extending our theoretical idea with case studies. At a methodological level, we are considering two types of empirical data:

- i.* Data collected by the concerned organisation and used by psycho-sociologists. These quantitative data allow us to appraise the effects produced by the IOD method on getting unemployed people back to work.
- ii.* New data collected by us during a qualitative survey within the Evry IOD team: our study is a complementary survey which aims to observe and analyse the interaction processes more precisely, especially the variations in the assessment from employers. In a concrete way, over a short observation period (February - July 2002), we have collected qualitative information from candidates and their courses by semi-directive interviews with the IOD social workers and observing interactions between candidates and team members. These cases illustrate our purposes and are a convenient way of gaining a good understanding of the firms' evaluation and selection modes, in order to find out how to bring about changes in employer recruitment and assessment practices.

The Bordeaux-based association Transfer has been responsible for the creation of about one hundred IOD teams in France covering approximately 10,000 unemployed people considered particularly disadvantaged. Our study is based on analysis of how the Evry team (in Essonne) operates. This team of one leader and three employment mediators was set up in February 2002 and works with a specific population: people who have been beneficiaries of the RMI (*Revenu minimum d'insertion*), the minimum income benefit, for three years on average, and are registered as unemployed. Note that IOD teams target different types of vulnerable groups (Transfer, 2002): young persons with no qualifications (14%), long-term unemployed (25%), RMI beneficiaries (54%) or other (the disabled, prison-leavers for 7%). To provide a few figures, during the observation period, 44 jobseekers received the services of the Evry team: 13 permanent employment contracts were 'confirmed' (meaning the trial period was completed and the contract became permanent), 4 people began work on fixed-term contracts that were to lead to permanent contracts, 2 were in their trial period, 14 were still looking for a job and 11 were in a different situation (1 person did not want the team's services, 6 did not keep up contact, for 3 services were suspended pending a change in circumstances and 1 left the programme at their own initiative).

In real terms, the IOD teams' intervention operates on three levels: on the labour market to change job creation, on 'hiring habits' to reduce selectivity and negotiate workers' employability and in the firm for high-quality recruitment and permanent change in employers' practices. At each level, the teams seek to redress the balance of competition and do away with possible irrational selection by companies. Their intervention attempts to change the pecking order, giving more priority to the more vulnerable and eliciting creation of new jobs by revealing employers' unexpressed needs. Action levers rely on direct contacts between employers and jobseekers, and

monitoring and follow-up of the employment relationship. Employment mediators act as contacts and guarantors to reduce uncertainty and remove opportunities for selectivity. The aim is to transform the labour demand, inducing a shift in companies' practices towards stable, long-term hiring, and less selectivity based on personal qualities unrelated to the work itself. This study observes, at each level, how these action principles are implemented and what tactics are employed.

3. Results: experience of back-to-work interventionist approach

3.1. Intervention on the labour market to stimulate job creation

The first intervention concerns job prospecting and business networks. This takes the form of developing closer relationships between businesses and the bodies that have contacts with the unemployed. The Transfer team is active on the local labour market via intense job search, the aim being to seize employment opportunities and tap them for people without access to those opportunities. This repeated contact should make it possible to build up a network of local businesses that are regularly called on.

While prospecting, the employment mediator speaks to the head of recruitment in the companies contacted, introducing itself as a representative of an association that is *'developing a new recruitment assistance service for businesses, subsidised by the Essonne County Council'*. To avoid employers' prejudgements, the term 'back to work' is replaced by 'recruitment assistance' which is a commerce and business term rather than social work; similarly, the team is careful to avoid using the terms 'long-term unemployed' and 'RMI beneficiary', talking instead about 'workers'. The employment mediator asks the employer about their labour requirements and elicits stable job offers (full-time, permanent posts) during a meeting.

In parallel, the team maintains a partnership with the business by keeping up regular contact, and developing cooperation. In Evry, a round table discussion was organised in May 2002 for the network of local businesses, to receive the first employers' commitments in favour of a group that tends to suffer discrimination in the labour market, and strengthen collaboration within the network. Five of the ten companies invited agreed to debate the theme of *'integration of employees into the company through the collaboration begun with the IOD team'*. This was quite an encouraging result for a new team, as the internal report for 2002 states the average as 3.5 companies per team.

To influence the hiring volume, the IOD teams generate as many decisions or plans to hire more staff as possible, by thorough questioning companies about their personnel requirements, and proposing candidates even if no vacancy has been formally identified. In practice, the employment mediators face two types of employer reaction:

- either they are always in need of unskilled labour, because they have staff turnover problems and are unsatisfied with the service of the ANPE (French national job centre);
- or they initially respond negatively, and the employment mediator has to prolong the discussion to achieve an offer: *'are you sure you don't need anyone for*

maintenance work or odd jobs?': the frequent backtracking by recruiters shows that businesses have low awareness of their own requirements.

One illustration of this is the case of Mr X. Before he entered the IOD programme, Mr X had sent his CV to a bakery company three times, but to no avail. The employment mediator contacted the company to find out about its needs and propose him as a worker. In the end, the employer offered an accounting job and agreed to meet Mr X.

To influence the hiring structure, the employment mediators negotiate the status of the jobs offered, *i.e.* they transform the offers made spontaneously by employers, bringing the latter to define these offers as full-time permanent posts.

This happened in the case of Mrs H (a 32-year-old who had been living on the RMI for 12 months): the employment mediator's intervention turned the proposed 30-hour-week contract into a full-time contract.

In practice, if the company offers a fixed-term contract (or permanent but part-time contract) that could lead to a full-time, permanent contract, the team accepts the offer. The same applies for a part-time post chosen willingly by the worker. In all events, strict monitoring of the employment relationship by the employment mediator, until the contract is confirmed as initially envisaged, prompts the employer to respect their commitments.

3.2. Reducing selectivity and negotiating workers' employability

Intervention on employers' expectations aims to go beyond over-qualification of positions, and in general the escalating use of selection criteria (education level, experience, age) in the formulation of offers and the recruitment process. The objective is to hand back unskilled posts to unskilled candidates, by refocusing the employers on their real requirements rather than an ideal profile. It has been observed that the way employers describe their requirements is not always governed by the true needs of the job (Reynaud, 1993): employers tend to display excessive demands and artificially raise the level of qualification required, either because they overestimate the complexity of the tasks to be carried out, or because they implicitly believe that better-qualified workers will offer more of the personal qualities useful for the job.

Out 'in the field', this intervention is observed when job offers are elicited: the employment mediators meet with employers in order to check the job content (features, precise tasks and place of work). The primary value of this process lies in the accurate description of the vacancy for workers, but it also calls into question the qualifications demanded, which are generally excessive for the reality of the job. This is the first chance to 'downsize' the employers' requirements, through asking them to list the tasks involved, and getting them to acknowledge that *'you don't need any qualifications to be a cleaner, do you?'*

These observations show that the labour demand does not have a pre-determined character: the decision to make a position available and the qualifications necessary are determined by interaction between the employer and the intermediary. This result concurs with the economic approach to distributed cognition (Hutchins, 1995;

Laville, 2000), according to which players' rationality and behaviour derive from interactions with other players.

To avoid placing candidates in a situation of mutual competition, which can be assumed to be damaging for the least qualified, the balance has to be redressed between the choice capacities of each player in the recruitment, by transferring some of the negotiating power away from employers towards jobseekers. Three principles are applied to achieve this:

- (1) Candidates never compete for a job: instead, the worker who appears to suit the best to the job requirements is proposed for each vacancy. The number of negotiated vacancies is indeed higher than the number of workers addressed to the team. This method modifies an important parameter of the recruitment situation: it avoids the choice generally made by the employer, who compares several candidates in order to take the best even if they are overqualified for the job, and thus eliminates an opportunity for selectivity.
- (2) Coherently, proposing several fixed and clearly described vacancies to each worker (according to their experience and wishes), who can freely respond. Good balance in recruitment relies on the quality of information available to the candidate (Marchal and Rieucan, 2003). In addition, a capacity for choice and control over the situation can reinforce the jobseeker's commitment, which is a necessary factor in a successful reintegration. Moreover, an evaluation of Transfer's action by Castra and Pascual (2003) shows that proposing three vacancies to the candidate is positively correlated with the subsequent confirmation of trial period.
- (3) Eliminating the usual distancing of the candidate, which deprives them of any negotiation power; above all, a successful return to work requires contact with the employer. The work of the IOD teams is to bring about and continue direct meetings between employers and jobseekers, by bringing them into face-to-face contact, and arranging an interview after which both the employer and the worker can decide whether or not to continue the process. The employment mediator's attendance at these interviews is one of the method's basic principles, and plays a crucial role.

An efficient way of negotiating skills is to alter the recruitment channel by eliminating the use of the CVs and application letter, an approach systematically taken by French employers. The employment mediator justifies the absence of these traditional documents by the fact that he has personally met the workers face to face, and can vouch for their qualifications and experience. This practice removes the opportunity for selectivity provided by a pile of CVs, and employers' requirements can be made to evolve by focusing the employer/assessor's attention on points other than criteria generally used in the recruitment process.

This practice is accepted by firms in 60 % of cases (Castra and Pascual, 2003). This is relatively well received by small and medium businesses, but is more difficult to take on board for large businesses, which have fixed recruitment procedures and do not welcome deviation from them. However, the head of recruitment at one large

insurance company did agree to meet a worker without presentation of a CV or letter, for a claims clerk post. Also, for highly-qualified posts, the no-CV application is difficult to accept and in such cases the team may help the candidate prepare a CV and letter. This was the situation for Mr M (29, on RMI for 51 months). He was looking for a job that would use his computing skills, and prospecting without a CV was difficult.

The second stage in eliminating opportunities for selectivity is to avoid the standard deskbound job interview by organising, instead, a broader encounter including a tour of the workplace. Once again, the employment mediator brings about a change in practice, proposing an interview in their presence, at the actual workstation concerned if possible. Castra and Pascual (2003) show that: this practice is accepted by firms for 75 % of cases; labour contracts start up more frequently after an interview between the employer, the candidate and the employment mediator, instead of a standard deskbound job interview; and possible contract breaches correspond more frequently to early resignations than early terminations (contrary to breaches occurred after a standard deskbound job interview). These results confirm that tripartite interviews reduce the hiring selectivity induced by standard interviews and redress the balance in the assessor/assessed relationship. The presence of the intermediary can however be perceived negatively for skilled positions: this was the case for Mr X, who went unaccompanied to his interview for the accounting job. Sometimes, too, an employer wishes to have a second interview with the worker alone. If the terms of employment are good and the candidate has no objection, the mediators will occasionally agree to this.

The employment mediators make several attempts to neutralise the selective effect of this meeting:

- before the interview, they talk positively about the candidate to the employer, stressing their strong points (to induce positive assumptions). Meanwhile, they briefs the worker to provide reassurance and as far as possible eliminate the sense of failure experienced by most RMI beneficiaries, which makes them vulnerable to employers' questions. Among other advice, they recommend *'above all, don't say you're living on the RMI!'*, to avoid giving out any information that might be interpreted negatively and bias the judgement.
- at the interview, the mediators intervene if the employer tries a 'trick question' or if the candidate is uncertain what to say, to avoid comments such as *'What have you been doing all this time? How come you haven't done anything in so long?'* They reframe the meeting by suggesting the employer talks about the post on offer, its features and the required skills, and by showing that they correspond to the worker's know-how. The employment mediator explained to us that the workers should *'say as little as possible about themselves, otherwise the recruiters immediately realise they have been out of work for a while'*; an implicit sign that a period spent away from work is a variable that carries particular stigma.
- after the interview, they talk with the employer about their impressions and any reservations about the candidate, so as to influence their decision by refocusing on solely work-related facts and qualify any negative interpretations.

Some of the cases observed show that major obstacles to employment were indeed overcome thanks to the attendance and intervention of the employment mediator:

Mrs D (47, on RMI for 22 months) was given an interview for a home help job, during which she fell asleep due to her alcohol problem. The employer nevertheless gave an 'agreement to start' but in the end Mrs D was not interested in the job. She later had an interview for a chambermaid's job. The employer noticed her alcohol problems but still took her on a trial basis, remarking '*as long as she does her work, it's not a problem*'.

Mr N (60, on RMI for 14 months) cannot read and write and did undeclared sewing work. Despite his illiteracy, the employment mediator organised an interview with an alterations company, and he was hired on a trial basis. But the employer saw that Mr N did not really know how to sew, '*he only knows one stitch*', and decided not to employ him.

In both these cases, obstacles to employment such as illiteracy, alcoholism or falling asleep in an interview were not the reasons for the failure to get the job.

In a third stage, the employment mediators try to negotiate placement in a work situation, allowing the candidate to actually see the workstation, gauge the tasks involved and meet with future colleagues. This gives the worker and the employer the maximum amount of information for their decision, and shows that the method sees the agents' environment as a decisive support for judgement. Moreover, CASTRA and PASCUAL (2003) show that organizing tripartite interview at the work place is more efficient for the confirmation of contract, especially if the candidate can converse with employed staff.

Finally, altering recruitment channels has an impact on the rationality of the assessment, which is 'situated' (Hutchins, 1995; Laville, 2000) in that the employer's rationality is based on information from the environment. The judgement differs according to the devices it relies on: it is more selective when it is made from a distance and based on a CV than when it is face to face in a working situation, with negotiation over factors emphasised by a person who is seen as 'guarantor'.

3.3. Committing firms to a high-quality integration and permanent changes in practices

One essential factor in successful job integration is follow-up monitoring of the job placement, from the initial agreement to the confirmation of the full-time, permanent contract. This takes the form of regular scheduled meetings with the worker and employer separately (which are positively correlated with confirmation of the contract according to Castra and Pascual (2003)), to raise any problem encountered by either, and negotiate solutions. The employment mediator thus reassures workers who lack self-confidence, and can, by acting as guarantor, reverse certain hasty decisions by the employer to stop the trial period. Certain cases provide concrete illustrations of the role of monitoring:

Mrs D was hired as a chambermaid on a trial basis, and did not turn up for work after three days. The employment mediator talked to her and the employer, who then agreed to continue the employment although he complained that she was

'slow'. This gave Mrs D self-confidence, and the employer praised her work and remarked '*she doesn't smell of drink any more*'. The permanent contract was confirmed, and the manager claimed to be '*very pleased with her work*'.

Mr P (37, on RMI for 34 months) easily found a job as a re-potter at a nursery, but his trial period did not go well. He too was '*too slow*' according to his team leader, and the employment mediator had several conversations with the manager, who wanted to end the trial period. In the end, Mr P was moved to watering work under a different team leader. The integration process had come close to failure on several occasions, and intensive monitoring was necessary to validate the permanent contract. The same nursery also hired another worker put forward by the IOD team, Mr B (36, on RMI for 75 months).

In parallel to this monitoring, the employment mediator encourages employers to devote some time to the integration of employees and development of management practices favourable to confirmation of contracts, for instance appointing a mentor who helps the worker integrate, mainly by on-the-job training and being available to answer questions. The employment mediator also negotiates the intensity of work, the difficulties of tasks, progressive self-sufficiency and responsibilities in the job, and working days and hours.

Through negotiation, Mrs M-J (47, on RMI for 62 months), who was afraid she would not be able to '*keep up*', was allowed reduced-level tasks and working hours when she started, to move progressively on to a full-time permanent contract.

Finally, another factor in successful integration is negotiation of development prospects (training and promotion, job profile, salary, working conditions).

For Mrs B (33, on RMI for 1 month), company-provided training was negotiated to enable her to achieve promotion from administrative clerk to personal assistant.

As such, Castra and Pascual (2003) show that negotiation of a contract term (as working hours or selected criteria) with employer has a positive effect on the confirmation of the contract.

The action taken by IOD teams engages the employer in new behaviour, which is a source of change in representations by post-hoc rationalisation, whether in hiring decisions, recruitment policies, employee integration or career prospects.

The receptivity of certain companies was observed at the round table organised by Evry's IOD team. To foster closer collaboration with businesses, the team presented themselves as being at their service (*'a service for your business: from analysis of your personnel requirements to long-term integration of your employee'*), while they are primarily at the service of the workers. The team underlined the coherence of the various stages in their service for successful integration of the new employee, and proposed that participants should share and discuss their own experiences of the IOD service:

Mr C, representing an office furniture company S, thinks that placing the worker in the real-life working situation at the interview built '*commitment in the workplace: discussions focus on the reality of the job, whereas in more traditional methods, the candidate discovers their job the day he joins the company*'.

Regarding integration of the newly-hired worker, Mr N from company K explained: *'after the second visit, we introduce the person to a mentor who will train him – a machine operator. It was a deliberate choice to appoint a peer, because a machine operator can train the new recruit better, plus, the task raises their own standing, which means he can develop too: the mentor can realise he's capable of a supervisory job'*. Mr M, manager of a chain hotel, proposed that *'the employment mediator should be present for longer, spend a day in the company to get a better understanding of the job and details of the tasks'*.

For these companies, recruitment efficiency indeed appears to rely above all on employee integration. It challenges the quality of information and rationality of decision-making in highly selective and remote (from candidates) recruitment processes.

The IOD teams' work could have a socio-economic impact: changes in practices in business networks could over time be applied to the benefit of other jobseekers, not just those assisted by the teams. The outlook touched on at the end of the round table confirm this: Mr N said his company's aim was to *'continue and step up the collaboration, particularly as we plan to take on about thirty staff in the coming months'*, and wished to *'talk about it with businesses from other sectors'*, while Mrs M from company O (council housing management) said she would like to talk *'to others from the same sector because as a landlord we have serious difficulties: the salaries are low and there are no prospects'*.

3.4. Encountered difficulties

The IOD team leader says that people living on RMI are *'the furthest from the labour market and the most 'damaged': they have tried everything else on offer and IOD is their last chance.'* In the employment mediators' opinion, this distance from employment, which prevents the development of self-confidence, is a difficulty that needs to be overcome. Sometimes, candidates fail to come to the interviews fixed by the team, or do not show up for their first day at work. To reduce this distance, the point is not to 'adapt' the jobseeker to the market by working on self-awareness, but to re-establish contact with employment, and take on the *'idea of going to work every day under a full-time permanent contract, with pay at the end of the month'*. Being put rapidly into direct contact with the employer, and visiting the workstation, are the main levers to achieve this. But other tactics can also be useful in matching the worker with a work situation:

Mrs M-J, afraid she would not be able to *'keep up'* with a full-time job, did not keep her appointments and said she had several allergies. The IOD team manager persuaded her to promise to come to the job centre every morning, note any job offers that might be of interest and give them to the team. She finally found a full-time, permanent job as a chambermaid and her employer is very satisfied with her work.

The most receptive businesses are mainly small and medium-sized companies, which often have turnover problems with unqualified staff, probably because the work is hard and the pay low, or because staff are overqualified. The team's network of businesses also includes 'socially responsible' or more 'caring' companies (for instance, company K), which are aware of the problems currently encountered by the unemployed and are open to innovative methods. Large companies governed by recruitment procedures are more difficult to convince, although it is possible to *'get*

into big groups by the back door: a worker was hired by a hotel group through the intermediary of one of its hotels that was in charge of recruitment.

The programme's failures can be explained by employers' lack of patience, leaving the workers almost no chance when they are very rapidly judged inefficient, or by poor integration monitoring.

Mrs R. was hired on a trial basis as order preparer in a sandwich shop. After three hours, the employer wanted to end the trial: *'she's inefficient and therefore not a good investment'*. Mrs R later found a full-time permanent job as a chambermaid.

Mrs P was hired on a trial basis as an accounts clerk, but only worked one week. The employment mediator analysed this failure as the result of poor monitoring, considering he had waited too long to fix a follow-up meeting.

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study shows that labour demand cannot be considered as an objective fact in a rational selection procedure. Treating hiring and integration practices as social constructs that can be modulated and transformed gives the job mediator back a genuine intermediation position, at the intersection of supply and demand. In this respect, job accompaniment focuses here more on job placement through tripartite negotiations rather than job search centred on jobseekers' personal difficulties. One major conclusion of the observations is that the long-term unemployed and RMI beneficiaries, who often suffer discrimination, are not as 'unemployable' as generally thought. The companies' change in hiring behaviour is another strong finding, confirmed by evaluation of Transfer's activities at national level in 2005 (Transfer, 2006) which shows that in more than 60 % of confirmed permanent contracts, some selection criteria have been neutralized: professional experience duration, education level, patronymic; and work conditions have been negotiated to give less vulnerability. In more than 80 % of confirmed permanent contracts, the recruitment was made without a CV, after a tripartite interview, and with one single candidate being presented (no competition). A progression in job task or wage or responsibilities has been negotiated in more than 50 % of confirmed, permanent contracts.

In appraising the wider applicability of these findings, this evaluation shows that the IOD method gives relatively good outcomes and does not introduce prohibitive costs. In 2005 indeed, the back-to-work rate was 67 % (72% in 2002), the rate of return to permanent confirmed work was 41% (46 % in 2002), and 75 % of these permanent contracts have been confirmed within 6 months; 800 workers, beneficiaries of minimum income benefit for 24 months, have found a job. Between 2003 and 2005, the work of IOD teams with 6,000 firms enabled 10,000 jobseekers to find a permanent job. The relative cost is 2,400 € per person (a budget of 16,500,000€ for 6,963 people) and 5,500 € per person returned to permanent confirmed work. Comparisons with other back-to-work policies for long-term unemployed are difficult in the absence of common basis. The back-to-work programmes as part of the *PARE* give a back-to-work rate of 30% for 2005 (Crépon *et al.*, 2005) and the costs are about 750€ for a 3 months programmes. But the mean

cost of longer privately operated back-to-work programmes is 2,300€ (source: ANPE, Klein, Renard and Traversier, 2006, p.2-3).

While this analysis concerns the French context to a large extent, the discussed hypotheses and the achieved results relate to the general, transnational problem of reducing long-term unemployment and professional exclusion. As such, promoting contact with employers and speedy return to a work situation are the main levers common to both the IOD method and the American *Welfare-to-Work* programmes – unlike coercive aspect of these latter (benefit payments are conditional on having a job) that can have potentially damaging effects in terms of poverty and social exclusion (Weir, 1997). It seems that lessons learned from the IOD programme could be extended, on the one hand, to other countries which have the same concerns and are ready to accept mediators' intervention; and on the other hand to vulnerable jobseekers with qualifications that are not always legible on a CV and for whom the tactics used might be slightly adapted.

The interventionist approach is not the only valid back-to-work method and a degree of worker's adaptation is sometimes required, but it remains too rarely considered at both theoretical and practical levels of employment policies. The IOD method proposes innovative devices that are promising for the most vulnerable unemployed and that can lead to new public policy guidelines. The findings of our study have some theoretical implications. According to the 'labour quality convention' approach, observations show that the employability of the long-term unemployed – and the definition of labour quality - depends above all on the context, selection methods and recruitment tools: recruitment processes based on a negotiation between the employer, the applicant and an intermediary, without CV, allows to redress the balance of competition and focuses on *emergent* and *distributed skills*. It also prevents from employers' over-selection and enables long-term unemployed return to work more promptly. This finding confirms experimental psychology research by Castra (1995) which shows that the outcomes of simulated classic hiring interviews vary a lot with the selection methods and tools implemented. Indeed, our study shows that the rationality of assessment of labour quality is situated: taking into account the real context of the vacancy often allows to reorient the selection in favour of the outcasts.

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