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**Digital or human support for the unemployed?  
Profiling tools and advisers at work in the French Public Employment Services**

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**Abstract**

Profiling of job seekers is traditionally carried out by advisors in public employment services. More recently, digital tools have been introduced to profile users and offer tailored services. The relationships between these two methods are studied based on a fieldwork in local PES agencies in France: Do the two methods coexist, or does the new replace the old? Are they experienced as complementary? And do they cause tensions in advisors' work? We show that statistical profiling is firmly established, and without any major collective protest. But advisors do not fully embrace the tool, nor they use it in the same way. They combine the two methods very differently depending on their conceptions of their profession, which largely result from their backgrounds and modes of entry to the PES. Analysing the day-to-day work of advisors, we establish that profiling tools – and more broadly the digitalization of the work of advisors – have a paradoxical, even counterintuitive, effect. Indeed, while they are supposed to limit the discretionary power of advisors, they introduce a new source of unpredictability in the workplace: one that is indexed to the different uses of tools and the conception of the work and the profession.

**Keywords**

1. Profiling tools
2. French PES
3. Advisors
4. Policy instrument
5. Frontline staff
6. Human expertise

## Introduction

Tools designed to profile unemployed people are basically a means of calculating the individual risk of experiencing long-term unemployment (Grundy, 2015). The proliferation of algorithmic technologies in public employment services (PES) in many OECD countries (Loxha & Morgandi, 2014; Desière et al., 2019; Haug, 2022) has had a significant impact on profiling. Traditionally, profiling was carried out by advisors, who relied on their professional expertise to characterize the situation of each unemployed person and deduce the appropriate support. With profiling tools, the risk of remaining unemployed instead becomes a statistical calculation, and the relationship of this calculation to the adviser's estimation of the same risk raises questions. Do the two methods coexist, or does the new replace the old? Are they experienced as complementary? And do they cause tensions in advisors' work?

We address these questions from the perspective of the French case, which has certain distinctive features: statistical profiling was implemented within the public employment agency (*Pôle Emploi*) very late (toward the end of the 2010s), but has become inescapable. So much so, that it structures the script for registration interviews, and has technical features designed to make it more acceptable to advisors. To study how advisors use statistical profiling, we conducted fieldwork at *Pôle Emploi* between 2020 and 2023. We brought together various materials: interviews with people involved in the implementation of statistical profiling, numerous written documents on the debate underlying profiling policies, interviews with 20 advisors working at several local *Pôle Emploi* agencies, and observations of jobseeker registration interviews, in the course of which profiling is carried out. We develop our analysis around three questions: 1) How statistical profiling was set up to assist advisors; 2) How this technical tool fits into adviser workplace environments; and 3) How advisors use it in various ways.

### 1. Statistical profiling in France: a helpful tool for advisors?

The spread of statistical profiling tools within the PES is part of a broader trend toward the digitization of PES (and public services in general). User contacts with welfare state services are 'increasingly digitalized' (Pors & Schou, 2021), and widespread use of IT and computers has been interpreted in terms of the transformation of street-level bureaucracy into 'system-level bureaucracy' (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002) or 'screen-level bureaucracy' (Hansen et al., 2018). In some cases, 'digitized welfare' (Coles-Kemp et al., 2020) goes beyond the delivery of certain services via online applications; indeed, as shown by the Australian experiment with a 'fully automated PES', it can mean remote monitoring of most users via algorithms (Casey, 2022). In a fairly similar configuration, the role of front-line agents is limited to assisting users or customers in their use of digital tools (Bullock, 2019).

In the French PES (as well as in most others), the information system is less invasive and hegemonic, and the service relationship only partially digitized. This is the case for the instrument we are studying here, namely statistical profiling, which is part of a 'double activation' policy (Considine et al., 2015): it is not only a matter of disciplining the unemployed, but also of influencing the practices of front-line advisors. Consequently, examination of both how this framing is produced, and how it is received by advisors, contributes to analyses of street-level bureaucracy (Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010). This in turn fuels questions about the future of the discretionary component, which is deemed inherent (or even necessary) (Brodkin, 2011) to advisors' work under the influence of digitization. Despite the variety of

technologies considered and situations studied, most studies diagnose a malaise among professionals: a downgrading of expertise, a reinforcement of remote hierarchical control, and reduced autonomy in supporting the unemployed (Nordesjö et al., 2022; Jansson & Erlingsson, 2014). This yielding of the discretionary aspect of work (Busch & Henriksen, 2018) to rising levels of automation (Jorna & Wagenaar, 2007) or disciplinarization (Zouridis et al., 2020) has also been diagnosed in other public services.

As one of the PES's many digitalization tools, statistical profiling is an interesting example, because it goes to the heart of the work of front-line advisors. When they meet unemployed people for individual interviews, they gather information about the person and qualify their situation in terms of employability and exposure to the risk of long-term unemployment, then deduce prescriptions and an appropriate form of follow-up. In the French case at least, the heuristic value of profiling lies in the place assigned to the technical tool in production of the service. This is because profiling does not produce any imperative recommendation that would impose itself on both unemployed person and adviser; rather, it is designed to assist the adviser in his or her activity. Of the various existing PES services digitalization models (Considine et al., 2022), it falls into the 'technology-assisted' category, i.e. technology that is targeted at the adviser and designed to influence his or her work with the unemployed.

The challenge is to understand precisely what 'assisted' means here, i.e. how profiling algorithms modify the work of advisors. These algorithms also produce a breakdown of jobseekers into categories, but according to an alternative – supposedly more efficient and rational – method, based on a calculation of statistical risk. As a result, the purpose of these algorithms is not simply to assist advisors, but also to take over part of their work. And since these conditions make it difficult for an adviser to 'say no to a computer' (Sztandar-Sztanderska & Zielenska 2022), the question arises as to whether this instrument replaces, complements, or weakens the profiling traditionally based on adviser expertise. The first step toward answering this question is to analyze the characteristics of the profiling tool and the conditions under which it is implemented at adviser workstations.

Between 2005 and 2008, an initial profiling algorithm was introduced within the public employment agency. It was designed to save money by identifying the most employable unemployed people and encouraging them to take up work more quickly. This first attempt was a failure. This can largely be explained by the algorithm's shortcomings in terms of precision and accuracy (Desière & Struyven, 2021). Advisers shunned it, because their own profiling often produced different results, and external evaluations showed that it was based on incomplete information. This undermined its effectiveness, and the management of ANPE – the national public employment agency (which had no control over how it was set up) publicly challenged its validity. This failure had a direct impact on the reintroduction of statistical profiling from the mid-2010s. Three main points emerge from this second experiment: the development of profiling was late in coming, but became an imperative necessity; it was introduced into the organization by stealth, as part of a wider digitalization plan; the tool incorporated a large amount of data and was designed to be a decision-making aid for advisors (Delpierre et al., 2023).

After statistical profiling was abandoned in 2007-08, this question disappeared from the *Pôle Emploi* agenda, as well as from its management's communication. There were, however, oblique indications that major investments were underway. The information systems department was recruiting regularly, and expanding its team of data scientists. As part of the national plan to digitize public services, *Pôle Emploi* was developing its web portal, grafting

onto it multiple applications destined to be accessible to jobseekers. Specific funding had been obtained for the initiation of large-scale data collection projects such as *Intelligence Emploi*. For the management, this digitization was a major step forward, because it offered a means of responding to the pressure of job seeker flows that were experienced internally as unbearable, and were interpreted by advisors as detrimental to their work. Officially, the average adviser portfolio was set to 350 – a figure that assumed many jobseekers were being followed up exclusively by e-mail or telephone. But actual portfolio size varied widely and could reach 700. Against this backdrop of scarce resources, profiling tools were seen by management as a response to the bottlenecks that had built up in many local agencies. Statistical (‘good’) profiling can be a way of modulating the service provided by offering ‘individually tailored follow-up’ and devoting ‘more time to those who need it most’, as some management representatives put it.

The strategic priority was therefore clear. Yet, the *Pôle Emploi* managers we met during our fieldwork were unanimous in their astonishment when we asked them about profiling: for them, there is neither a tool, nor a policy, of statistical profiling. According to our fieldwork, over the past decade, statistical profiling seems to have completely disappeared. The term is never mentioned by *Pôle Emploi* managers. This disappearance is however no more than a facade: it is the word ‘profiling’, above all, that has been banished from internal and external communication. According to a member of the management team, this was because ‘it created a lot of tension... more problems than solutions.’ Bruised by the failure of the first experiment, management was now cautious, highlighting the ‘personalized job seeker diagnostics’ tools aimed at ensuring each job seeker would be ‘directed to the right service, the one that is a good match for his or her situation.’ This is precisely what profiling does – but the word was left lurking in the shadows. Only the data scientists responsible for developing the algorithms were willing to say that the ‘personalized diagnostics’ was based on profiling tools, which had in fact been discreetly implemented as part of the information system update. The IT interfaces were now installed on adviser workstations, and henceforth the application used for registration interviews incorporated a profiling and recommendation algorithm that has found its way into the heart of the workplace environment by stealth.

The jobseeker’s ‘personalized diagnostics’ application is now the mainstay of the mandatory interview at registration, at the end of which jobseekers are assigned to different types of support. Those considered to be ‘most in difficulty’ are directed toward ‘reinforced’ support, while those who are ‘most autonomous’ get simple ‘follow-up’. Those placed in an intermediate category are directed toward ‘guided’ support. The three types of service differ in terms of frequency of meetings with advisors, contact methods used (face-to-face or remote), and range of services on offer. This personalized diagnosis differs from the initial profiling tool in several respects. The information base is very different: the data included is both more numerous and updated during the interview by the adviser, who supplements it with qualitative variables that serve to open up space for the exercise of his or her expertise. This additional data includes information on living conditions, job-seeking behaviors, deviations from occupational targets (being qualified for a job for which demand is low, not having the qualification corresponding to the target), etc. The algorithm assesses the jobseeker’s position in relation to employment, breaking it down into different dimensions: occupational project, job search, labor market situation and ‘peripheral obstacles’. It is, then, much more than just a score for distance to work or the risk of long-term unemployment. Rather, the classic measure of employability is supplemented by, for example, an assessment of the jobseeker’s behavior and social situation. Profiling does not boil down to a single score, and even less to an automated system for decision-making or suggestions. The profiling tool uses its technical characteristics to enable

(or even encourage) the adviser to work in an interpretative way. As one member of *Pôle Emploi*'s management team put it: 'One of the difficulties is to ensure that the adviser uses the algorithm correctly [...] That's why we enrich what the algorithm says, by adding the reasons why it thinks this or that. It's a real plus for advisers, and we hope they'll embrace it more easily too.' The fact that profiling aggregates more, and more varied, information may build its acceptability in the eyes of advisers, possibly underpinning the decision support provided to them, and thus weigh on the relationship between statistical-based profiling and caseworker-based profiling. For this reason, we must now examine how this technical tool fits into advisers' workplace environment.

## **2. Profiling tools within advisers' workplace environments**

The discreet, though effective embedding of profiling (through personalized diagnostics in particular) does impact advisers' day-to-day work – first and foremost via the computer interface that frames their interaction with jobseekers. Like any technical tool (Akrich, 2010), it helps codify the exchange by predefining not only roles and modes of interaction, but also the expectations and intentions of the parties involved. The room for maneuver available in carrying out the registration interview is therefore constrained by the current socio-technical system, which at the same time puts the relationship in tension. Indeed, the script imposed by the diagnostics tool immediately positions the jobseeker not so much as a benefits claimant or someone seeking support toward finding employment, but as someone required to answer a series of questions concerning the verification of administrative data, the definition of a 'reasonable job offer' and the identification of potential obstacles. He or she is then presented with details of the services on offer at *Pôle Emploi* – with an emphasis on digital tools and online platforms. Given the sheer number of these – according to one adviser, there are 'almost 270 applications dedicated to job search, training and guidance' – only a few are generally mentioned, often on-the-fly. This does nonetheless enable advisers to point to their knowledge and skills in terms of support. In this way, they distance themselves from the image of a simple 'data entry operator' that the personalized diagnosis tends to convey.

Lasting between 30 and 45 minutes on average, these interviews are particularly dense in terms of the amount of data entered, information delivered, tools mentioned, services suggested, etc., despite the advisers' efforts to render intelligible the workings of an institution stuffed with acronyms and tools. Observation of these interactions reveals a tension between the relative passivity of the unemployed person (imposed from the outset by the diagnosis) and the desire to make them 'self-responsible', capable of taking charge of their own job search by leveraging the tools made available. In fact, it is as if the newly-registered unemployed person is seen as a jobseeker who, while perhaps not deficient, at least needs a 'diagnosis' so that they can be 'prescribed' the means to rapidly gain autonomy in navigating the PES service offer, meet the institution's expectations – and, ultimately, find a job.

Yet another tension also regularly arises out of the fact that this last perspective (like matters of compensation), is ultimately scarcely touched upon in the course of this interview. It is largely devoted to profiling, despite the fact that many unemployed people's expectation that this first (and sometimes only) face-to-face meeting will result in the identification of concrete job leads. Because of this tension, advisers end up frequently repeating the principle that '*Pôle Emploi*' is not here to find you a job, but to help you find one on your own' – and profiling is intended to help target this assistance.

The diagnosis, followed by assignment to the various support modes, may well be confusing to unemployed people. But within the advisors' practice, it is all perfectly routine – in some respects forming the common bedrock of their work. These registration interviews are an integral part of their weekly schedule and everyone, regardless of status (fixed-term or open-ended contract), seniority or expertise, conducts them. Far from being a cause for criticism, the fact that these procedures are both amply equipped and institutionally framed seems, if anything, to contribute to their acceptance. They enable advisors to get by even without having a thorough grasp of all the systems and information required for the work of offering jobseekers guidance and support (the multiplicity of which is described by all), while still leaving a certain amount of room for interpersonal skills to come into play.

In fact, besides smoothing out the terminology used in the first profiling experiments, the 'personalized diagnosis' has another advantage that makes it easier to accept. With a few (not insignificant) exceptions (such as contact information, reasonable job offer), the tool allows you to leave certain items unprocessed, or indeed to switch to another interface (online applications, various websites, etc.) during the compulsory post-registration interview. The diagnostics tool also includes free text spaces for adviser comments – limited, of course (we'll come back to this), but nonetheless praised by many and used by all. Lastly, the results produced by the algorithm do not automatically assign the case in question to a given portfolio: this is decided by the adviser, and may even be discussed with the jobseeker.

These technical configurations contribute to rendering statistical profiling discreet (or even stealthy) – even in the eyes of the researchers, who have observed advisors juggling screens or gathering accounts from professionals who indicate (in hushed tones) that they do not complete all or part of the diagnostics, at risk of being called to order. The possibility of bypassing the tool, while very limited and rarely used, might suggest a failure of the tool, but seems more likely to be read as a condition of its appropriation – an appropriation which, in the case of technical innovation, can be seen as proof of success (Akrich et al., 1988). This 'human/machine', or 'human/non-human' combination (Latour, 1992), saves a space for the adviser's relational work. Indeed, while most advisors scarcely question the usefulness of the personalized diagnostics tool, or even understand its value, all insist that it is no more than a technical support. Advisors tend to stress that it cannot (and should not) replace the 'human', signaling – as others, including doctors, have done (Méadel & Akrich, 2010) – both their expertise and the relational dimension of their work. For these professionals, the proper functioning of the profiling algorithm requires them to identify the needs, resources and individual difficulties of the unemployed person. They argue that some of these difficulties can only be solved within a dialogue that happens in a climate of trust (health problems, phobias, experiences of professional harassment, housing problems, addictions, etc.) and/or cannot easily be resolved within the categories offered by the interface – partly for legal reasons.

'[...] Someone who has recently experienced harassment at work, when she was only 21 and it was her first job, she develops a work phobia and it's not registered in the file. Oh yes, it does say that there's a barrier to employment. Yeah, but what kind of barrier? And the person can't fill out the file with this. To talk about this, they need to trust you. Otherwise they will simply avoid applying for a job, because they're scared.' (Interview with Mrs. K., adviser, 7/12/2022).

If the files are correctly filled out, which is no simple matter – and all the more so, given the dematerialization of support – these tools can be used to 'personalize' support by means of

filters that enable advisors to target parts of their portfolios to promote offers of training, employment or support – but also to identify those unemployed people in difficulty:

‘[...] it’s really tools that enable us to do what we call portfolio segmentation, so to really work in-depth on candidates in a general way, to do the famous ‘stock take’ for very long-term jobseekers [...].’ (Interview with Mrs. M., adviser, 6/12/2022).

Indeed, while the majority believe that profiling tools are likely to facilitate certain aspects of advisors’ work, they do, like any innovation (Alter, 2010; Gaglio, 2011), also carry a risk of disappointment which is all the greater because of high expectations – particularly under the influence of public discourse on the revolution to be brought about by the digitization of public service in general, and the increased use of algorithms in particular (Baudot et al., 2015).

Thus, while few advisors dispute the principle of assigning jobseekers to categories on the basis of their degree of autonomy, all acknowledge the presence of internal discrepancies in their portfolios that are at odds with the profile-to-service offer match. This is the case, for example, for some jobseekers in the ‘follow-up’ category, who are supposed to be highly autonomous and have thus been prescribed a direct return-to-employment without need of any lengthy training – but who nonetheless express the need for it. This is also, and above all, the case with the ‘guided’ category, which is meant to apply to jobseekers seeking retraining or training. But through a series of communicating vessels, those who have no such project but are not sufficiently autonomous (especially in terms of digital confidence) to be assigned to the (now entirely dematerialized) simple ‘follow-up’ category, get lumped together with others who would ordinarily be covered by ‘reinforced’ support, whose portfolios regularly prove to be oversubscribed.

While the principle of digital tools (including the personalized diagnostics tool) is rarely questioned, their use is frequently criticized as being cumbersome, sometimes random, and requiring a plethora of actions and clicks:

‘What I find a bit difficult is that we still have a lot of clicks, pages and things to check. [...] So with all that, there’s a kind of data entry, there’s a real data entry job to be done. If only for the interviews we have – every interview involves a few lines of writing. Well, sometimes we have a lot to say [...] unfortunately, the database doesn’t allow me to put it all in the same place. So, I have to cut them out. This job involves a lot of processing.’ (Interview with Ms. P., adviser, 6/12/2022)

Lastly, even though personalized ‘diagnostics’ are now fully integrated into the adviser’s day-to-day professional practices, both its perceived limitations and potential criticisms of it are less likely to be voiced because of the tool’s success than because of the lack of space in which to express difficulties or suggest avenues for improvement – a sine qua non for the long-term success of any innovation (Akrich, 2006). Moreover, this absence of a concerted approach (one that is attentive to the concrete practice of advisors) is likely to fuel their fears about the risk of the human being replaced by the machine – or at least of their skills, and the way in which they see their profession, as being called into question. This can be seen clearly in the different ways in which these tools are used.

### **3. Two ways advisors use profiling in their day-to-day work**

The fact that algorithmic profiling has become an inescapable part of the daily work of *Pôle Emploi* advisors does not however mean that they rely on the statistical results produced by profiling. It is true that there has been no collective mobilization aimed at removing profiling from the digital tools at their disposal. Individually, however, advisors are voicing criticisms, the main one being that profiling threatens their professionalism by replacing their own assessment of individual situations. It is not so much that they are questioning the ethical issues involved in the systematic use of profiling, more that they fear the consequences for their professional skills and identity. In interviews, advisors emphasized their expertise, based on ‘face-to-face’ assessment of the unemployed person’s situation and career path. Here, we find a rhetoric that has classic status within professional worlds vulnerable to automation and digitalization, namely that of the threat of the human being replaced by a tool, as in the case of cashiers faced with automated checkouts (Bernard, 2012).

On the second day of our fieldwork in the local agency B. branch, the manager called us together to pass on some feedback from the advisors we’d met the day before. ‘They were worried, because they’re afraid everything will be handed over to Artificial Intelligence’ she reports, ‘they feel devalued if it’s the machine that decides everything.’ (Agency B., notes dated 07/12/2022)

Some advisors expressed fears that our academic research could be used to establish new algorithmic profiling tools. Such fears crystallize the opposition advisors have established between themselves and the tool. In practice, however, these fears underlie their more nuanced day-to-day negotiations with the tool. While all the advisors agree that the tool should not be totally relied upon, they also all express the complementarity between their expertise and the tool’s calculations. Their practices reveal a compromise between suspicion (or even rejection) of the tool’s categorization, and the injunction to obey the institution (*Pôle Emploi*) responsible for promoting reliance on the tool. In other words, no adviser completely disregards the profiling tool, and neither does any adviser intend to subjugate their own expertise to the tool’s categorization. There are, however, several variations to be found within this common approach to professional assessment and profiling. At *Pôle Emploi*, there is a polarization of practices and uses. While one adviser might stick to a ‘procedural’ approach characterized by a concern to fill in the form items almost exhaustively during an initial registration; another might be described as more ‘selective’, leaving some boxes blank and more room for personal assessment.

At Agency B., we attend a first individualized follow-up interview with Mr C. He is interviewing a young woman holding a French ‘business’ baccalaureate, who has 7 months’ work experience in a bakery. She has filled in the online application prior to attending the appointment. The adviser scrupulously goes through all the items, and asks her about her career plans. The young woman is sure of herself: she wants to train to work in eyelash extensions, and her goal is to work in a beauty salon, or for herself. The adviser explains that training opportunities in this field are rare, and moves on to the next items, which ask her to say what she would consider a ‘reasonable job offer’. Although she assures him there is only this one plan that is close to her heart, the adviser insists that she must fill in all the boxes. He quotes a list of jobs along the lines of ‘receptionist, secretary’, and despite the young woman’s objections, concludes with a satisfied look. ‘OK? Shall we confirm?’ He then criticizes her for ‘going off in all directions’ and reminds her that she needs to ‘secure the plan’ by going through the steps dictated by the form. Once the form is fully completed, the algorithm informs her that she will be in the ‘guided’ category. The young woman has already uploaded two CVs to her personal

digital space, but the adviser says he'll book her in for the 8-week 'skills prep'. The young woman tells him that she can't afford to wait 8 weeks to look for a job, and he replies: 'but you have to go step by step, that's the protocol.' (Observation in Agency B, 6/12/2022).

This particular adviser's assiduous approach to completing the form is part of a more all-encompassing approach to support that entails adherence to every detail of the roadmap set out by *Pôle Emploi* – in this case, the injunction to send unemployed people on training (or refresher) courses in certain skills that are supposedly required. He is not alone in using the profiling in this way, and in so doing he reveals the way in which he embodies his role – in this case, using a strongly procedural-based method, which scarcely goes beyond institutional directives.

This procedural-based use of profiling differs from the more selective approach, which entails distancing oneself, during the initial registration interview, from the items on the forms. Mrs. D. is a counselor specializing in supporting young people who face multiple barriers to employment. She, unlike Mr. C., feels she can't just settle for following the tool's instructions, because she wants to be sincere and credible in the support she offers to the young people she works with. For her, the tool, and the items to be filled in, are symbolized by the computer screen that separates her from the young person sitting opposite her at her desk, hindering the human relationships that are at the heart of her work as a counselor.

We ask her how she combines listening to young people and filling in the form in the allotted timeslot (30 minutes). 'And so, the questionnaire, of course, comes back to something we've already grasped. But we still spend a certain amount of time in... we left some screens... aside for a while. It punctuates things. The screens are there to punctuate stages of the interview. And that's how it was before I started working with young people. We go into the questionnaire, we discuss it again, and if they agree to join, we sign them up. And when we are signing the contract, at that point, right in front of them, I enter the conclusions of the interview and we give... we decide together on the next appointment, since we're lucky enough to be able to postpone the appointment [...].' (Interview with Ms. D., adviser, 30/11/2022)

The young people Mrs. D. is in charge of have already been categorized during an initial registration interview with another adviser. When she meets a young unemployed person referred to her for the first time, Mrs. D. assesses whether they correspond to the specific follow-up category into which they have been classified. In short, what Mrs. D. uses above all is her own assessment of the young person's background, characteristics, and aspirations.

'So, the prescription doesn't mean we're going to monitor them, it means that we meet them for an initial interview, which is a bit like a meeting where we get to know each other, and confirm the diagnosis – or not. The person must also agree to receive the support on offer.' (Interview with Ms. D., adviser, 30/11/2022)

The case of Mrs. D. points us toward the variables that explain these differences in use of the algorithmic profiling tool: adviser specialization being one such difference. Advisers in charge of supporting the most vulnerable unemployed people, who are far from employment – as Mrs. D. does – insist on the artificiality of certain items, which fail to consider the multiple barriers to employment that will only come to light in the course of a discussion with the adviser. Two other variables also emerge from our fieldwork: the adviser's length of service with *Pôle*

*Emploi*, and the training they have received. Because Mrs. D. has been with *Pôle Emploi* for 17 years, her employment there predates the merger. As the daughter of high school teachers, she did a degree in art history before sitting the competitive examination to become a *Pôle Emploi* civil servant. She says she is attached, by virtue of her family socialization, to the notion of ‘public service’, which for her, takes precedence over the managerial and digital logics likely to hamper this ‘service’. Along with other public service advisors recruited to *Pôle Emploi* more than 15 years ago, her use of the profiling tool is more occasional, and she insists that it represents a threat to the strong identity of advisors shared by these ‘old hands’. This identity is characterized by the fact that they hold university degrees or work psychology qualifications, equipping them with special skills in supporting the unemployed. Whereas the ‘younger’ advisors come from a wide variety of backgrounds – especially digital technology, engineering, and business. They have been recruited on private contracts, and share neither the professional ethos of the older staff nor their nostalgia for a PES in which digital (and even IT) tools played only a marginal role. These ‘youngsters’ therefore rely more readily on the institution and the profiling tool – like Mr C., who has been at *Pôle Emploi* for 4 years and was previously a retail manager.

The most divisive variables in behaviors observed around the profiling tool are: the category of public the advisors serve, their length of service with *Pôle Emploi*, and their training. This finding is in line with observations made by Céleste Watkins-Hayes in two social services departments in Massachusetts, USA (Watkins-Hayes, 2009). She realizes, as we do, that seniority in the profession explains social workers’ greater or lesser distance from prescribed work, as do other variables such as the sex, class and race of the agents and users they encounter - which opens other analytical perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

Our fieldwork at *Pôle Emploi* reveals that statistical profiling is now firmly established, and without any major collective protest. This does not mean, however, that advisors fully embrace the tool, nor that they use it in the same way. Their backgrounds and modes of entry to the institution are extremely heterogeneous, and reflect different conceptions of the adviser role. Because it reinforces the weight of the institution in their work, statistical profiling reveals diverse conceptions of the profession. In this respect, the statistical profiling tool – and more broadly, the digitalization of the work of advisors – has a paradoxical, even counter-intuitive, effect: by limiting the discretionary power of advisors, it is meant to reduce inequality of treatment and variability of practice, even as room for flexibility remains, but it allows room for flexibility and does not erase the diversity of professional practices. As a result, a new source of unpredictability arises in the workplace: one that is indexed to the use of tools and the conception of the work and the profession.

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