

Opinions of the National Audit Office

Digital employment services

In recent years, Finland's public employment services have made an effort to cut down on human resource expenses by replacing personnel with digital employment services. The objective has been to update the State's service structures and increase the share of services offered to citizens and companies digitally, so that the services can, in the future, be performed at a high standard more effectively and economically than presently in order to improve the productivity of service provision.

The audit assessed how effective and appropriate these online services currently are. Online services in themselves are a small budgetary expense, but due to the losses to the economy generated by unemployment, the indirect effects of employment services could be significant also to the government budget.

Based on observations made during the audit, public employment services have been a forerunner in development of online services in central government. An effort has been made to develop services in a customer-oriented manner, but the available resources have been modest for example in relation to labour policy expenses. Finland's government productivity programme has accelerated the pace at which services are being transferred online. Employment offices no longer intend to provide personalised face-to-face services to all customers.

Identifying a customer's service needs has become more difficult, because employment office staff do not meet all customers. Allocation of jobseekers to three different service lines is carried out mechanically, and the customer's experience and qualifications in the labour market are not taken into account. It has become more difficult to make suitable job offers to jobseekers, as it is difficult to form a clear picture of the jobseeker's true potential from the information submitted online or collected during telephone conversations.

The objective of online services has been to transfer routine tasks, such as entering customer's background information, from the employment office employees to the customer. This makes it possible for the employment office staff to focus on more demanding tasks involving face-to-face guidance. This has not been entirely successful, as the information submitted by customers online often contains errors, which the employment office then has to correct. Therefore, some of this information is entered into the system twice. As a result, face-to-face appointments, which are intended for more in-depth guidance, have not become more time-consuming or numerous.

The interfaces for online services must be modified so that they are as clear and simple to use as possible. The use of overly complex bureaucratic jargon should be avoided on the website. If the efficiency of these online services is to be improved, more resources must be allocated to their development. This would allow officials to use more time for their primary customer service work.

The monitoring and assessment of digital employment services have been lacking, but the monitoring method in use has not in itself deviated from general practice. No conclusions can be drawn on the effects of policy measures or programmes on the basis of monitoring individual statistical figures.

Proper assessment of the effects of online services is currently impossible, as information is only stored in the databases for these services for a maximum of 2 years. Therefore, data cannot be combined

e.g. to the employment statistics maintained by Statistics Finland, which are compiled two years after each reference year. The Ministry of Employment and Economy must pay closer attention to this.

It is the view of the National Audit Office that face-to-face employment services cannot be replaced entirely by digital services in the future. Some customers may not know how or be able to use online services; e.g. a customer may not have online banking identifiers. Some people oppose these kinds of "services" in principle and want face-to-face service. Some customers will continue to need more in-depth guidance and assistance, especially young people just entering the labour market, who still have very little knowledge and experience of the employment. From the perspective of the national economy, these persons form a potentially good group of workers, who have their entire careers ahead of them.

Customers feel that some of the online services for public employment services function reasonably well. According to employment offices, online services should be marketed and advertised more than they are at present, as the knowledge of a continuously changing customer-base is often quite limited. Communications on the matter should be centralised nationally. In practice, the Ministry of Employment and the Economy must be responsible for the marketing of these services.

The benefits of online services in relation to face-to-face services could not be determined on the basis of this audit. In other words, it is unclear whether online services have been able to compensate for the increase in duration of unemployment caused by a drop in the number of employment office employees.

Recommendations by the National Audit Office

The National Audit Office recommends that the Ministry of Employment and the Economy

1. conduct a more systematic and in-depth assessment of the effects of online services, and guarantee access to the data needed for this assessment
2. examines whether young people who have recently entered the labour market are allocated in a fair and appropriate manner into different service lines
3. simplify the language used in online services and improve interfaces for online services
4. market online services nationally.