

MODELS OF GOOD PRACTICE IN ASSISTING PEOPLE WITH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES TO GAIN COMPETITIVE EMPLOYMENT*

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a study carried out at University College Dublin‡ during the period 1997/99 [17]. The study was set out to explore patterns of good practice in developing paths to employment in mainstream companies for people with general primary learning difficulties. To this end, the study analysed the strategic model adopted by four landmark employment provider agencies operating in Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK.

The aim of the investigation was to identify key issues which could contribute to:

- The production of a guide on paths already tested by ‘landmark’ employment provider agencies.
- The development of a framework of key elements, on employment practices, to be used in further studies on larger numbers of employment provider agencies.
- The progression of the debate in relation to the development of innovative regulations in the field of employment for people with learning difficulties.

The premise for embarking on this study was the contradiction between principles stated by Human Rights Declarations, constitutional legislation and national regulations in favour of the employment of people with difficulties and, on the other hand, the reality of high unemployment among this group of people compared to the rest of the European population [8].

The focus of the study was on people whose primary impairment is general learning difficulties. This restriction should not itself prevent conclusions applying to groups of people with other kinds of disadvantage e.g. psychiatric illness, sensorial or physical disabilities. However, the distinction was necessary because different kinds of impairment give rise to different type of needs and lead to different ranges of job opportunities [5]. ‘Learning difficulty’ is the most common term used in European English to define what in other areas (e.g. North America) is termed ‘mental retardation’. Both terms refer to an intellectual impairment which is the main cause of people being unable “...to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being...” [25, p. 143].

The next section discusses some theoretical contributions on the social exclusion of people with disabilities. Considerations from that discussion

underpinned the choice of studying employment provider agencies which use a ‘place, then train’ approach. The third section explores employment policies for people with disabilities applying to the four Member States who host the case studies, and to the USA. The section also discusses the characteristics and results of employment provider agencies operating in the four Member States and in the USA. The core of the research was the study of key issues and strategic training models designed for people with learning difficulties. The fourth section deals with this topic. The fifth section presents a tool designed to explore the philosophical approach of employment practices (i.e. ‘care/welfare’ or ‘human rights oriented’ approaches). The paper concludes with a summary.

2. THE ‘PLACE, THEN TRAIN’ METHOD

This section suggests looking at three varied points of view on social exclusion. Contributions are not directly related to disability issues, but were selected because they permitted a fundamental move away from the heuristics of disability, in order to study exclusion as a general social problem. The first issue revolves around a possible cultural barrier which obstructs the inclusion in modern societies of those people who present diversity in respect of the ‘normal’. Geertz [9] discussed this effect in relation to people with indeterminate sex, but similar considerations may apply to other groups of people such as those with disabilities. Secondly, Berger and Luckmann [2] argued that a damaged process in the ‘primary socialisation’, which takes place at an early age for people in general, may affect the development of self-esteem and the achievement of an adult status. In the case of people with disabilities the stigmatisation and exclusion from the ‘rooms’ of a ‘normal’ life such as school, friends, leisure time, but also their exclusion from the idea that they can actually become adults may well play a role in damaging their primary socialisation process. This may result in retarded and sometimes seriously impaired growth to adulthood and development of proper social skills. Thirdly, Giori [10] pointed out that in the case of old age, due to retirement from work, a reduction of social relations linked with a job position may affect the clinical picture of a person, even if in principle there are not any physiological reasons for a health deterioration. On the other hand, the improvement of a friends/relationships network may lead to a lower and delayed deterioration of the actual clinical picture of a person in his/her old age. The same concept could also apply to people with disabilities who in general have been excluded from social life, e.g. integrated education and/or employment.

One conclusion to be drawn from these theoretical contributions is that people with disabilities could experience a better ‘primary socialisation’ process if

* The study was performed under the auspices of the European Commission DG XII, Science Research and Development, Training and Mobility of Researchers (TMR) Programme, Marie Curie Research Training Grants, contract No. ERB4001GT965125.

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‡ Without the encouragement and advice from Donal McAnaney PhD and Francesca Lundström PhD, the study on which this paper is based would not have been possible. The author also would like to thank Timo Lajunen PhD for his precious supervision on the realisation of this paper.

they lived within a non-discriminating culture. An undistorted process of ‘primary socialisation’ would allow people with disabilities to achieve higher levels of self-esteem, ‘adult status’ and social skills. These are indicated as personal characteristics which would facilitate their integration into community life and therefore into employment [3][12][4].

Cultural barriers are a major problem causing the social exclusion of people with disabilities, therefore a possible distorted socialisation process which in turn leads to further exclusion. Actions in this respect, although essential, produce results only over an extended period of time. The study looked at the ‘place, then train’ employment practice, an innovative method which may, on the other hand, produce effects in a relatively short time. In the final recommendations of the European Foundation’s recently published book [7] on positive individual experiences of employees with disabilities, stress was placed on the important role played by specialist mediating organisations in improving the chances of employment for people with disabilities. The innovation introduced by these organisations consists in their strategy based on a ‘place, then train’ approach. People with disabilities seeking jobs are first placed in mainstream companies, then trained in situ, whereas the traditional method was based on the reverse principle of first training (in institutions such as special schools or sheltered workshops) then trying to place clients in open employment. According to Gottwald and Pendyck [11], the traditional ‘train, then place’ approach was not effective, since while a person with learning difficulties may be able to learn a series of tasks, often he/she is not able then to transfer successfully knowledge to other settings. An advantage of the ‘place, then train’ method is that by starting a work/employment experience people with disabilities are introduced into a network of relationships based on ‘adult roles’. In this respect, according to what Giori [10] suggested in relation to elderly people, but which could equally apply in the case of people with disabilities, this expansion/creation of relationships could play a key role in improving a possible altered clinical picture of ‘disabled’, thus in turn incrementing chances for a job career.

3. LEGISLATION AND STATISTICS

In general, regulations for facilitating employment of people with disabilities were established early this century as a form of compensation for the significant number of disabled people produced by wars. Another reason for improving legislation was the need to regulate consequences of injuries caused by accidents at work. Congenital impairments, such as learning difficulty, were included under legislation only at a later date. The two main approaches characterising employment policies were identified in the mandatory and the anti-discriminatory legislation. The first model applies in Germany, Italy and in Spain. In these countries companies are forced to include among their staff a quota of employees with disabilities. The UK discontinued the mandatory approach in 1995 and chose an anti-discriminatory approach. According to this procedure, employers break the law if during the recruitment process, they discriminate, without justifiable reason, against people with disabilities [16][13]. The USA has a long tradition on anti-discriminatory regulations which culminated in the American with Disabilities Act 1990 (ADA). In the USA, moreover, legislation acknowledged and regulated ‘supported employment’, a ‘place, then train’ practice which developed there during the 1970s [18].

The number of provider agencies adopting a ‘place, then train’ method has been increasing in both Northern America [18] and in Europe, in Italy [14], since the mid-1970s. While figures on the USA agencies were accessible at a level of Federal States, similar type of data was not available for the EU.

Table 1 gives a breakdown of employment provider agencies operating in the EU Member States hosting the four case studies. Data is based on researches conducted at a national level [1][14][21][3][15].

As shown in table 1, the first agencies were operating in the mid-‘70s in Italy, in the early ‘80s in the UK, in the mid-‘80s in Spain and in the early ‘90s in Germany. The total number of agencies in the four EU Member States increased significantly from five agencies operating in the mid-1970s up to 636 in the mid-1990s. This is surprising as the growth occurred in the absence of any specific regulation. Overall, these agencies provided some type of work placement to approximately 38,000

Table 1: Number of provider agencies operating in the countries hosting the case studies.

	Germany	Italy	Spain	UK	Total
Mid-1970s	/	5	/	/	5
Early 1980s	/	30	/	8	38
Mid-1980s	/	85	1	24	110
Early 1990s	3	142	4	79	228
Mid-1990s	80*		36	210***	636
			310**		

Source: [1] [14] [21] [3] [15]

* In 1999 the number of provider agencies in Germany was 175 (BAG UB, 1999).

** A total of 65 agencies, although operating in the mid-1990s, did not indicate the date of their establishment.

*** While data related to the mid-1990s in the UK. is from Beyer et al. (1996), data related to previous years is from Lister et al. (1992).

people with disabilities. Of these placements, over 11,200 were actual employment, over 21,800 were work experience in preparation for employment and over 5,000 were placements in ‘social welfare projects’¹. A national association of supported employment is operating in all the four countries. However, while in Germany, Spain and the UK most of the employment provider agencies were affiliated to the national association, in Italy such a link was not established.

In the USA the growth in the quantity of employment provider agencies was accompanied by a large number of studies carried out at a University level [19][22][23] and the development of specific legislation on supported employment [19][24][16]. Within this context great emphasis was put on systematic data collection at a federal level. According to Di Leo [6], over 3,500 employment provider agencies were operating in the USA in 1993 and, as Wehman [25] pointed out, up to 1996, over 150,000 people with disabilities had achieved competitive employment through assistance by employment agencies.

4. TWO DISTINCT STRATEGIC MODELS

The exploration of key issues and strategic models was performed through analysing four landmark provider agencies. The selection of the agencies was based in part on the personal experience of the author and recommendations from his supervisor, and in part on the basis of advice from European experts in the field. A total of 114 European experts were contacted and 48 of them answered. In order to be selected, the two agencies recommended by experts were required to meet all the following characteristics:

- a minimum percentage of 60% of assisted clients with primary learning difficulties.
- a minimum of five years experience in job-matching/supported employment practice.

- a minimum of three employment specialists devoted full time to job-matching/supported employment practice.
- existence of a written procedure on the adopted method.

The identified agencies were located in Germany, Italy, Spain and UK. Data on agencies’ strategic model was obtained through the collection of written documentation and through open-ended interviews (face to face) with the managers and collaborators of the agencies. Overall, the four employment provider agencies provided placement in mainstream companies to approximately 900 people with disabilities, of whom over 700 were employed with a legal contract of work [17].

The first goal of the study was to identify key issues in order to build up a framework of elements characterising the agencies’ profile and strategy. Key issues were investigated under the following headings:

- General information (e.g. agency’s profile, population served, agency’s specialisation).
- Political dimension (e.g. nature of founder, presence or not of political mandate).
- Clients (e.g. targeted clients, referrals).
- Financial resources (e.g. source of funding, funding conditions).
- Staff (e.g. staff qualification, staff specialisation)
- Training process (e.g. type of assessment, duration of training).
- Outcomes (e.g. nature of contract, subsidies, host companies).
- Follow up (e.g. client monitoring).
- Agency marketing.

The study also isolated a number of key issues related to the training process. These elements permitted the identification of three major strategic training models, which were distinct on the basis of the varied sequences

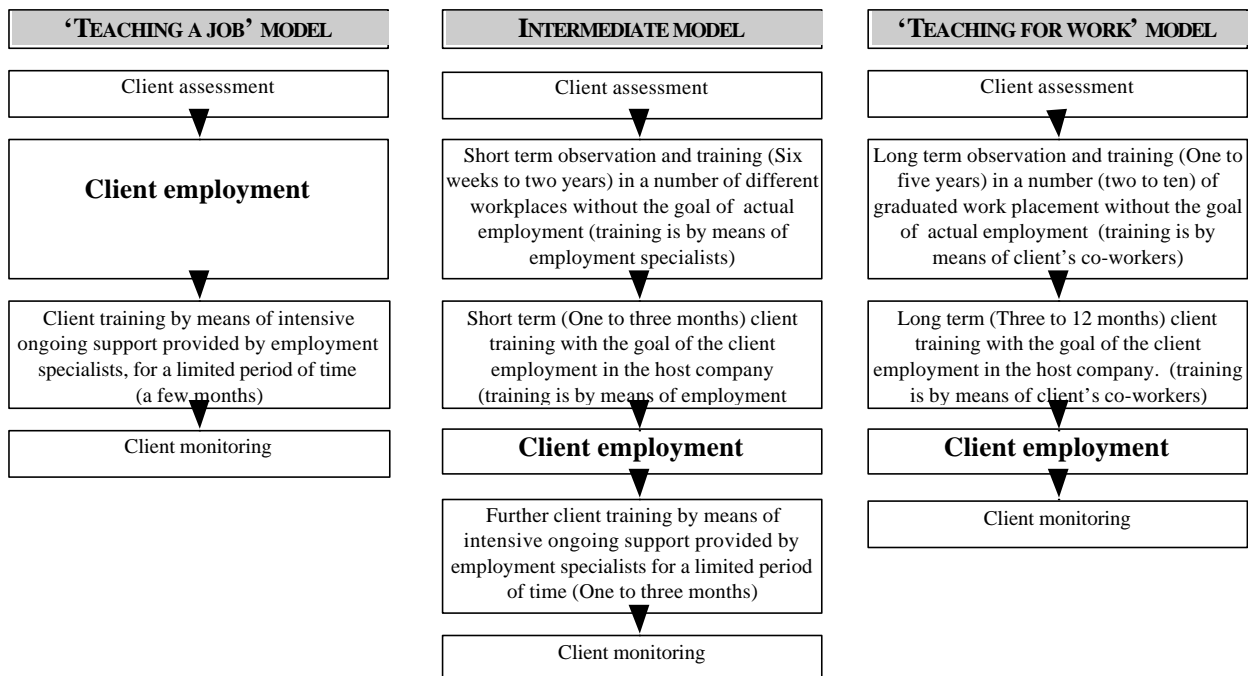


Figure 1: Strategic training models aimed at providing competitive employment to people with learning difficulties.

of training and actual employment, the duration of training, and the level of support provided. The three models had in common a first phase of client assessment through interviews and/or meetings with both the client and key people who knew the client well. In addition, models shared a final phase of client monitoring over an indeterminate period of time. Client monitoring was designed with the aim of identifying in advance potential problems with the client's employment experience. While two of the identified models were quite distinct from each other, the third model included elements of both the other two. Figure 1 provides an outline of the three strategic models here denominated 'Teaching a Job' (on the left side), 'Teaching for work' (on the right side) and 'Intermediate model' (in the centre).

As shown in figure 1, after an initial phase of client assessment, the 'Teaching a Job' model includes straight employment in a mainstream company. Client training, in fact, is provided after the commencement of employment, through intensive ongoing support supplied by employment specialists for a limited period of time (a few months). Since the major goal of the training process is training aimed at employment in the actual host company, this model has been called, here, 'Teaching a job'. The Spanish agency has adopted such a model, which is derived from the American model of 'supported employment'.

In the 'Teaching for work' model client assessment is followed by long-term (one to five years) client observation aimed at further client assessment and training in a number (two to 10) of different graduated workplaces (e.g. from a familial to a bureaucratic organisational model). The goal of the placement in any of the host companies is not client employment. Rather, the goal is to improve client's capacity to understand the reality of work, appropriate work behaviour, work values and the management of relationships at work. Moreover, this period of time allows the agency observing the client for assessment purposes. The subsequent phase consists of training (three to 12 months) in a company chosen this time for planned employment. The final phase in this model is the actual employment of the client in the host company. In all phases of this model teaching trainee the job is responsibility of the company through client's co-workers. Since the training process's goal is to improve general skills such as self-esteem, emotional autonomy and social skills, this model has been called 'teaching for work'. The Italian agency originally devised and adopted this model.

The 'Intermediate model', in the centre of the figure 1, includes elements of both the previous two models. For instance, the sequence of the initial four phases mirror the 'teaching for work' model including 1) client assessment, 2) client observation and client training in a number of different workplaces without the goal of actual employment, 3) client training in a company chosen this time for his/her planned employment and, finally, 4) client employment. Similarly to the 'teaching a job' model, however, in the intermediate model the responsibility for teaching the client the job is on the

agency's employment specialists, rather than on the clients' co-workers in the company. Finally, like for the 'teaching a job' model, after the employment the client receives intensive ongoing support for a few months, from employment specialists. The approach of the German agency and the one based in the UK reflected this last model.

5. PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

This section aims to discuss about a tool whose goal is to explore the philosophical approaches of employment practices. To this end it is helpful to look at the historical evolution of services designed for people with disabilities. In this respect, it emerges that in the past the services' focus was more on disabilities, rather than on abilities. The terminology used to identify services' users tended to be closer to that of 'patients' and, within that perspective, services were considered as a means to treat people for their 'illness' and/or as a means of social maintenance. This model of intervention could be termed as 'care/welfare oriented'. A second more recent alternative approach, on the other hand, focuses on people's abilities and adopts terms such as 'client' or 'customer' in order to identify a user of services. Within this context services are considered to be a means for enhancing social inclusion. This would represent a transitional phase aimed at enabling people with disabilities to achieve their potential as, for instance, stated by the Declaration on the Rights of the Mentally Retarded Person [25][13][20].

The development of programmes for the occupational integration of people with disabilities into open employment is an attempt to implement the second philosophical model which could be termed 'social inclusion/human rights oriented'. In the present phase of cultural transition from the first to the second model, however, it is possible and perhaps inevitable that elements of the former philosophy will persist in services which are, in principle, inspired by the new approach. It must be pointed out that the issue is not which of the two approaches is better, rather the point is to be aware of which philosophy guides an employment strategy in relation to a client's personal condition. A major risk for a 'care/welfare oriented' approach could be that it might prevent people with learning difficulties from accessing the same status of employment as co-workers without disabilities only because the rehabilitation programme is focused primarily on health and social maintenance. This would be unfair in particular for those people who, despite the disability, do have a potential for full working capacity. On the other hand, a 'care/welfare oriented' approach in employment services might be legitimate and appropriate as a better alternative to segregating services for those people with the more severe disabilities.

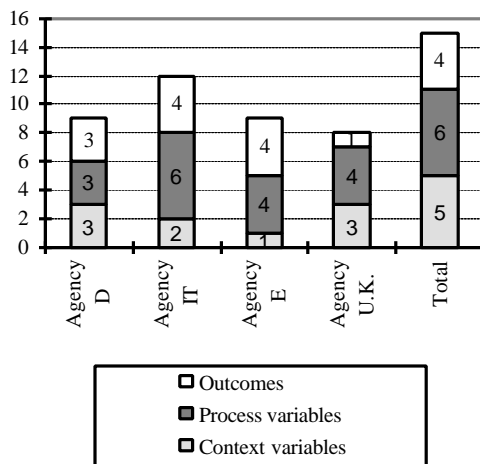
In order to identify to which extent a philosophical approach underpins an employment practice, 15 variables were identified as indicators of 'care/welfare' rather than 'human rights oriented' approaches. Among selected variables five played the role of context variables², six were process variables and four were outcome variables.

While it is not possible to discuss here about all the 15 indicators, three of them are described as an example. They include 1) type of financial resources (from Health/Welfare or Education/Labour Department) as a context variable; 2) trainer profile (employment specialist teaches client the work or his/her co-workers play this role) as a process variable and 3) nature of the contract between client and company (legal or no legal contract of work) as an outcome.

The criteria adopted in order to understand if variables indicated a ‘care/welfare’ or ‘human rights oriented’ approach, was based on two major considerations. On the one hand, variables could display a bias towards a ‘care/welfare’ model when their values echoed the philosophy which typically applied to the traditional care/welfare services. On the other hand, a tendency towards a ‘human rights’ approach emerged, when the values of variables echoed the philosophy that also applied, in principle, to groups of unemployed persons without disabilities. For example, there is a tendency towards a ‘care/welfare’ model when 1) an agency is funded by a Health/Welfare Department; 2) employment specialists teach client the job, rather than his/her co-workers doing so, and 3) employment is without a legal contract.

The study did not set out specifically to analyse the philosophical approaches of the four provider agencies concerned. In fact the theme emerged during interviews and in analysing documentation on the legal context and the agencies. In this perspective any detailed comparison of the agencies or the quantification of variables must be considered ‘post hoc’ and at best tentative. Nevertheless, it is interesting to present agency specific profiles as an illustration of the potential application of the methodology.

Applying this analysis to the four agencies revealed that in each of them there was a co-presence of ‘care/welfare’ and ‘human rights oriented’ approaches. Figures are provided in graph 1.



Graph 1: The presence of ‘human rights oriented’ approaches by agency in the 15 indicators by context and process variables and outcomes

As graph 1 shows, although the tendency of all the

agencies was to include a greater number of variables displaying a ‘human rights oriented’ approach, in most agencies such a tendency was not pronounced. The agency in the UK (Agency UK), for instance, had eight out of a possible 15 variables revealing a ‘human rights oriented’ approach. Both Agency E (in Spain) and Agency D (in Germany) had nine out of a possible 15 variables disclosing a ‘human rights oriented’ approach. In the case of Agency I (in Italy) a ‘human rights oriented’ approach was more distinct with 12 variables out of 15 revealing such a bias.

On the basis of graph 1, it is also possible to analyse figures by looking at the nature of the indicators examined. In other words, it is possible to differentiate the indicators depending on whether they represented context or process variables, or outcomes. In this respect, it emerged that Agency UK and Agency D had the greater number of context variables showing a ‘human rights oriented’ approach (three out of five variables), followed by Agency I (two out of five variables). Agency E had only one context variable displaying a ‘human rights oriented’ approach. Process variables, which in principle are under the control of each agency, indicated a ‘human rights oriented’ approach in most of the agencies. All the process variables for Agency I showed a ‘human rights oriented’ approach. Agency UK and Agency E both had four out of six process variables displaying a ‘human rights oriented’ pattern. In the case of Agency D, half of the process variables (three out of six variables) showed a tendency towards a ‘human rights oriented’ approach. Finally, with regard to the outcomes variables, it emerged that Agency I and Agency E were completely ‘human rights oriented’ as four out of four variables showed such a bias. Agency D had three out of four outcomes revealing a ‘human rights oriented’ pattern. In the case of Agency UK, on the other hand, outcomes resulted ‘care/welfare oriented’. In fact one outcome only, out of four, displayed a ‘human rights oriented’ tendency. On the one hand, this is not surprising as Agency UK assisted a higher proportion of clients with severe learning difficulties. On the other hand, however, it is not clear to which extent the level of clients’ disabilities actually affected the adopted employment practices and the philosophical approaches of the agencies.

6. SUMMARY

This paper began by looking at three different points of views on social exclusion in general. Firstly, as Geertz [9] discussed, cultural barriers may play a significant role in obstructing the inclusion in modern societies of those people who present diversity in respect of the ‘normal’. Secondly, a non-discriminating culture would allow a better ‘primary socialisation’ process which in turn, as argued by Berger and Luckmann [2], would determine higher levels of self-esteem, ‘adult status’ and social skills. These are personal characteristics necessary for a better integration into community life and therefore into employment [3][12][4]. Finally, as Giori [10] discussed in relation to elderly people but which may also apply to people with difficulties, the expansion of a

friends/relationships network due to a working position, may well play a significant role in improving a person's altered clinical picture of his/her disability. This in turn would facilitate his/her occupational integration and job career.

This paper focused on the 'place, then train' procedure. To this end, four landmark employment provider agencies were identified with the goal of analysing in detail their adopted strategic model. Agencies, which were selected with the help of recommendation from European experts, were located in Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK.

Before analysing agencies' profile and employment procedures, the paper gave an overview on legislation and figures on agencies in the EU Member States hosting the case studies, and in the USA. While three out of four EU Member States had a mandatory employment policy, the UK discontinued such an approach in 1995 and adopted an anti-discriminatory policy [16][13]. A total of 636 employment agencies were reported to operate over the four EU Member States. Agencies provided some type of work placement for approximately 38,000 people with difficulties of whom over 11,200 were actual employment placements [17]. Legislation in the USA is anti-discriminatory-like and includes specific regulations on 'supported employment', a 'place, then train' practice developed in the US during the 1970s [18]. In 1993, according to Di Leo [6], over 3,500 employment provider agencies were operating in the USA. Wehman [25] pointed out that up to 1996 over 150,000 people with difficulties had gained competitive employment through supported employment programmes.

The core of the study was on identifying key issues and employment strategies. General findings revealed three different strategic training models here denominated 'Teaching a job', 'Teaching for work' and 'Intermediate model'. The distinctive characteristics between models included the varied sequences of training and actual employment, the duration of client training, and the level of client support provided. Results also indicated that, although the concept of employment practices implies a 'human rights oriented' philosophy, employment practices may include a number of 'care/welfare oriented' elements with no regard for the degree of the clients' difficulties.

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¹ Data on Italy distinguished between employment with or without a legal contract. The 'Social welfare project' consists of a placement in a mainstream company without a legal contract, designed for those people with the most severe disabilities.

² Context variables here means internal agency's characteristics rather than external factors such as social, political or economic context.