



Implementing the Place-Train Approach in Train-Place Services: Organizational Culture and Supported Employment¹

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ABSTRACT

Supported employment (SE) is increasingly implemented in employment services worldwide. The disruptive character of SE, involving a shift from 'train-place' to 'place-train' models of vocational rehabilitation, has led to growing recognition of implementation challenges and problems that negatively influence service efficacy and employment outcomes. This article enriches existing literature by presenting a theoretical framework that conceptualizes how organizational culture within public employment services can impact SE implementation. The argument is illustrated with cases from the Norwegian Employment and Welfare Service (NAV). Organizational culture plays a crucial role in shaping employee actions, behaviors, and foundational assumptions, which in turn influence local interpretations and applications of SE. Using Yin's (2018) 'embedded single case study' method, our research concentrates on various units of analysis within a singular case. Our findings underscore the importance of considering organizational culture and context, acknowledging SE's disruptive nature, and recognizing the nonlinear dynamics of implementation processes.

KEYWORDS

individual placement and support / implementation / organizational culture / place-train supported employment / train-place

Introduction

Supported employment (SE) has been described as a 'paradigm shift' (Waghorn et al. 2009) in vocational rehabilitation. This shift involves transitioning from the traditional 'train-place' model—based on stepwise, preparatory activities like prevocational training in sheltered workshops, transitional employment, and skills training—to the 'place-train' approach, where participants, without extensive preparation, are matched with competitive employment of their choice and receive substantial employment support based on individual needs.

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The SE approach¹ draws from welfare philosophies of social inclusion, emphasizing the importance of integrating people with disabilities in local communities and networks; normalization theory, focusing on social roles and how inclusion can promote wellbeing by developing positive social functions and changing mindsets related to marginalized social positions; and recovery philosophy, centering on the client's active process, needs, and preferences (Frøyland 2018).

SE encompasses a set of research-based measures—including the five-step European Union of Supported Employment (EUSE) and Individual Placement and Support (IPS) models—for working with people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups (persons with mental health challenges) to access and maintain paid employment in the open labor market, based on a recovery-oriented service philosophy (Drake et al., 2012; Menear et al., 2011; Wehman, 2012). This approach is based on the belief that every person has the ability to work if provided with appropriate support. The Nordic countries have all adopted versions of SE measures, but to different degrees and in different ways within the different welfare systems and labor markets (Bonfils, 2022; Fogelgren et al., 2021; Sipilä and Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, 2024; Skjold and Lundberg, 2022; Spjelkavik, 2012).

Realizing this shift requires implementation: efforts to incorporate a program, approach, or practice at the level of society, organization, and/or practitioners. However, implementing disruptive innovations like SE in existing service organizations is challenging and complex work (Menear et al., 2011; Moe et al., 2021). A number of barriers to implementing SE have been found at system, organization, and individual practitioner levels (Bergmark et al., 2018; Bonfils et al., 2017; Hasson et al., 2011). Systemic factors involve national rules and regulations that clash with SE service models. Organizational factors include poor management, lack of funding, administrative requirements, and contradictions between organizational structures and the enactment of SE's person-centered approach (Kostick et al. 2010). For example, a study comparing the implementation of SE in three employment offices in Norway found that performance and accountability requirements limited frontline workers' ability to provide personalized services (Skjold and Lundberg 2022). Central individual-level factors that were identified include employment specialist (frontline workers who work with job-seekers and employers) competencies, skeptical attitudes toward SE, and limiting beliefs about a client's potential among professionals (Cocks and Boaden, 2009; Vukadin et al., 2021).

While the literature on SE implementation approaches offers rich insights into barriers and facilitators for implementation, we argue that a focus on the role of organizational culture (i.e., the normative beliefs and shared expectations in the organization; Schein, 2010) is important to improve SE implementation and nuance our understanding of implementation processes and activities. Organizational culture has gained increasing interest in the broader literature on implementation in social services and healthcare (Gale et al., 2014; Nilsen, 2015; van der Zwet et al., 2020). For example, conceptual model of evidence-based practice implementation in public services by Aarons et al. (2011) highlights inner-organizational cultural characteristics. However, organizational culture requires greater attention in the literature on SE implementation.

Moreover, the development of the research literature has, to some extent, been facilitated by viewing implementation as linear, technical, and administrative processes (Hupe and Hill, 2016; Nilsen, 2015). This is incongruent with the growing recognition

in implementation research and organization theory that features of the existing organizational context (such as norms, mindsets, and shared history or beliefs) can significantly influence or shape new programs and interventions—and that disruptive innovations like SE can be difficult to implement in existing organizations (e.g., Cloutier et al. 2015). Local actors interpret program rules and implement these in ways that make sense in their organizational context (Bakkeli, 2022a; Bonfils, 2022; Vossen and Van Gestel, 2019). In an important study, Moe et al. (2021) highlight the role of local decision making by frontline workers (i.e., employment specialists) when implementing IPS in organizational contexts with little support or interest from their surroundings, managers, and stakeholders. In short, implementation for these workers was experienced as ‘complex and not straightforward’ (Moe et al. 2021).

In this article, we will examine what significance organizational culture holds for implementing SE measures in employment services. The research question is as follows: How can an organization’s culture and profile influence the implementation of SE approaches in public employment services? We present a theoretical argument that shows how organizational culture has certain consequences for how SE is implemented. We illustrate this argument by presenting an embedded case study (Yin 2018) on implementation of SE in the Norwegian Employment and Welfare Service (NAV). The case study draws on existing research literature, and empirical material from two previous research projects—that is, ‘Front line innovations in the welfare services’ (INNOWEL, see Bakkeli 2022b) and ‘Quality work in Supported Employment services’ (Bakkeli et al. 2020). Our hypothesis is that, to realize the shift from ‘train-place’ to ‘place-train’ employment services, developing a supportive organizational culture may be an essential—and hitherto overlooked—implementation factor. Changing culture is difficult and takes time. A reason for this is that culture is pervasive and influences all aspects of how an organization performs its central tasks, while also being connected to organization members’ values, which gives stability, meaning, and predictability (Schein 1990).

We begin with an outline of the methods and continue with the theoretical framework, drawing on organizational culture. We then turn to the SE intervention and the organizational context of NAV. In the analysis, we focus on the shift from train-place to place-train and introduce a cultural profile framework outlining how organizational culture shapes the implementation of SE in different ways. This is supported by two case illustrations based on a reanalysis of empirical material from prior research projects. Last, we discuss the present study’s findings and contributions in light of existing research literature.

Method

Our study aims to contribute a theoretical perspective that demonstrates how organizational culture may account for the challenges encountered in implementing the Supported Employment (SE) method within bureaucratic public organizations. To this end, we have employed a deductive research method, as we examine the influence of organizational culture on SE implementation using two classic theories from organizational theory. These are the organizational culture theory, primarily drawing on the works of Schein (1990); Schein (2010), and the Competing Values Model by Quinn (1988) and Cameron et al. (2012).



Our research design is qualitative, focusing on a detailed, contextual analysis of the influence of organizational culture on SE implementation. We adopt the ‘embedded single case study’ approach as outlined by Yin (2018). In this approach, the researcher focuses on multiple units of analysis within the single case. The embedded design allows a nuanced understanding of the case, and is helpful for exploring different dimensions within the case. In our study, the SE method—regarded as a service model with certain core principles and values that is diffused across different service contexts and countries—constitutes the case, while the context is provided by the local NAV offices.

We chose an embedded case study design due to the broad and complex nature of the case, which encompasses many aspects. Consequently, we identified two sub-units for analysis: the ‘train-place, place-train’ approach within SE and the interplay between organizational culture profiles and the criteria for SE implementation.

We have developed a theoretical argument based on a close reading of previous studies (Bejerholm et al., 2015; Bonfils, 2022; Bonfils et al., 2017; Drake et al., 2012; Enehaug et al., 2021; Gjertsen et al., 2021; Harkko et al., 2023; Nøkleby et al., 2017; Spjelkavik, 2012; Vukadin et al., 2021). The second part of analysis draws on empirical material from two prior research projects, both collected by the second author (see Bakkeli, 2022b; Bakkeli et al., 2020). In office A, the material consists of 10 interviews with one manager, a method supervisor and eight employment specialists. In Office B, the empirical material is comprised of five interviews with an office manager, a method supervisor, and three employment specialists. The material was audio-recorded and transcribed by professional transcribers. We reanalyzed the material by doing a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The analysis process consisted of first rereading the original interviews from each office, and next coding relevant parts from the material. Themes were then developed iteratively by drawing on categories and concepts from organizational culture theory frameworks; Quinn 1988) and by comparing similarities and differences between the two office cases. The themes include organizational assumptions and values, team dynamics, orientation to organizational rules (e.g., performance measurement), and leadership styles. The research method facilitates a detailed exploration of complex phenomena such as organizational culture and SE implementation.

Our study adheres to ethical research standards, ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. All data are utilized in accordance with relevant data protection regulations and ethical guidelines for research. Data Protection Services for research (SIKT, formerly known as NSD) in Norway have assessed that the two research projects which this article draws data from was in adherence to data protection regulations (project ref. 52008 and 163030).

Theoretical framework

Although there are many definitions of organizational culture, we find some common features in these definitions. Organizational culture involves a complex pattern of perceptions, ideas, values, norms, attitudes, and behaviors shared by those who work in the organization. Bang (2011) states that organizational culture is ‘a set of cognitions that develops through interactions between the organizational members and is expressed in the way members behave’. The existence of culture can be explained through systems and normative approaches (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). The normative approach

highlights the existing and shared normative framework. In this framework, the values are also fundamental because they act as a normative guide (Wiener and Vardi 1990) and control the individual's behavior. In other words, the organization's culture acts as a compass, helping members navigate the organization. That is, the cultural compass limits the individual's behavior through the shared norms that exist in the organization (Schein 2010).

Schein (1990) adds that organizational culture is something that emerges naturally to master problems by adapting to the environment ('external adaptation', e.g., a common understanding of the goals and means of the organization) and using the internal interaction between employees ('internal integration', e.g., common language and terminology). Schein and Schein (2018) bases the definition of organizational culture on these two terms:

The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

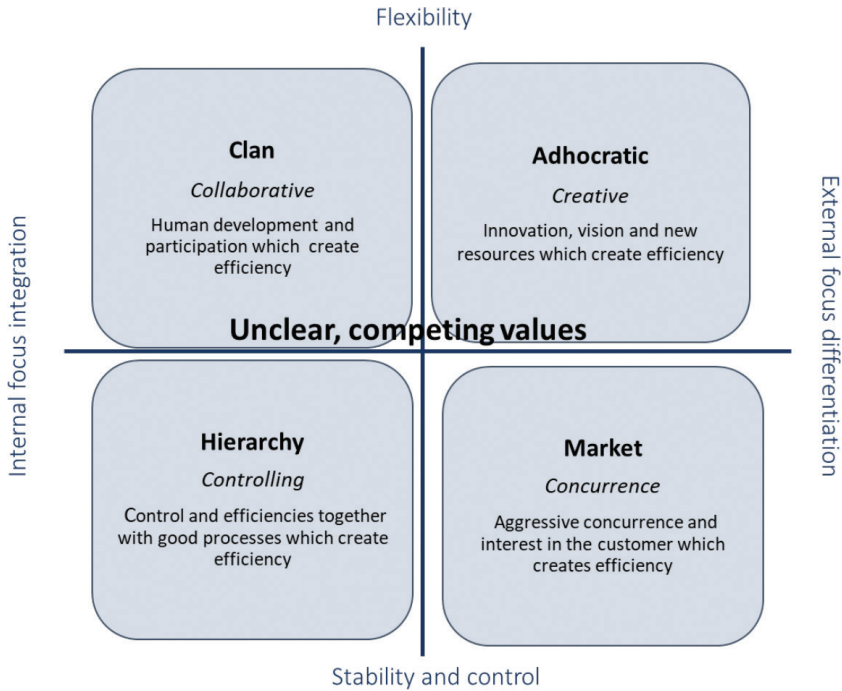
According to Schein and Schein (2018), the components of culture form on three levels: cultural expressions and manifestations (artefacts), expressed values and norms (espoused beliefs and values), and basic underlying assumptions. The most visible are cultural expressions or artefacts in the organizational structure. 'Density' and 'looseness' refer to the extent to which employees have a common understanding of assumptions, norms, and values in the organization.

Organizational culture is formed over time and arises through the organization's history and social learning (Schultz 1995). A strong culture provides structural stability (e.g., the culture survives even if some members leave the organization) and predictability (though not for all). At the same time, it can create a vicious circle because the members of organizations become increasingly less aware of why they act the way they do. Culture is thus self-reinforcing, difficult to change, and can create blindness. In addition, changing organizational culture may challenge existing norms and values that affect the organizations' basic assumptions (e.g., regarding stability). However, changing organizational culture also takes time and can create 'perceived pressure' (Jacobsen and Thorsvik 2019), which can be justified by 'historical inefficiency' (March and Olsen 1989). This combination leads to inertia and a lack of flexibility in the organization.

Socialization in an organization also plays a significant role in cultural transfer to new employees. The new employees undergo a social learning process that is an adaptation process, where new employees integrate the organization's values, accepted behaviors, and social codes and form a social identity (Jacobsen and Thorsvik, 2019; Schein, 2010). Socialization also takes time and occurs through three phases: pre-employment, the meeting phase, and the metamorphosis (McShane and Von Glinow 2015).

Culture implies a dichotomy. We can understand culture as specific and unique and that cultural traits apply only to that particular organization. Nevertheless, at the same time, the organizational culture can be categorized and have general features (Kouzes and Posner 2017).

Figure 1 Competing Values Model (CVM).



Kouzes and Posner (2017) argue that, although organizational culture can be specific and characteristic of a particular business, organizational culture can be categorized. This culture can be described through the Competing Values Model (CVM), which can help map the cultural profile of organizations (Polychroniou and Trivellas, 2018; Quinn, 1988). These categories are defined in two dimensions (see Figure 1). One is the horizontal axis between internal focus versus external focus, and the vertical axis moves from the top down, from flexibility/freedom to stability/control. These dimensions form four types of culture: (1) *clan*, where efficiency and values are related to collaboration; (2) *hierarchy*, with a focus on control and predictable processes; (3) *adhocratic*, characterized by the culture associated with innovation, creativity, and flexibility; and (4) *market*, which emphasizes competition, a market focus, goals, and performance management (Jacobsen and Thorsvik 2019). Quinn (1988) refers to this as the ‘competing values’ model because the criteria initially seem to carry conflicting messages. This categorization of cultural types highlights the relationship between structure and culture.

In this section, we have explained the existence, development, and significance of organizational culture, largely relying on Schein’s theories and presented Quinn’s cultural profile of organizations next. In the Analysis section, we first use Schein’s definition of culture to understand how the train-place approach has been embedded in vocational rehabilitation services over many years, why this can cause difficulties, and why it takes time to implement the SE-type services which bases on place-train approach. We then use categories from Quinn’s culture profile model to reflect upon how organizational

culture shapes implementation, drawing on examples and cases from previous research. Further, we analyze how different—but simultaneously present—competing values can shape SE intervention.

Organizational context

The train-place approach characterizes the traditional work-oriented measures in employment services, while SE is based on the place-train method (Frederick and Vanderweele, 2019; Hasson et al., 2011; Nazarov et al., 2012; Spjelkavik et al., 2011). In accordance with the train-place method, job seekers who are unprepared for employment and have adaptation needs must be trained before they can realistically find a job in the ordinary labor market (Jenaro et al. 2002). In the place-train method, training takes place in the workplace in the ordinary labor market and not in sheltered activities (Nøkleby et al. 2017). Both the job seeker and the employer are viewed as needing support and attention through close follow-up and involvement in the inclusion work. The SE approach can be described as a five-step process: (1) Client Engagement, (2) Vocational Profiling, (3) Job Finding, (4) Working with Employers, and (5) On and Off Job Support (European Union of Supported Employment 2010b). Importantly, cooperation with both employers and service users does not end upon employment: The follow-up work continues as long as there is a need for it from one or both sides (Nøkleby et al. 2017). The place-train approach also focuses on employers and their role in work inclusion. This means that the job seekers' and employees' latent ability to work and the employer's needs should be made visible and reinforced (Frøyland et al. 2018).

The SE approach in the Nordic countries shows a complex interplay of public and private sectors, with variations in implementation based on local policies, organization, economic incentives, and cultural norms (Harkko et al. 2023; Spjelkavik 2012). In Norway, there has been an expansion of SE services in the public employment services, especially since 2017 and onwards with the Inhouse follow-up program (Schönfelder et al. 2020). In Sweden, SE has been widely adopted in both public employment services, municipalities, and among private providers (Fogelgren et al. 2021). In Finland, there have been increased national-level efforts to upscale SE from 2020 and onwards, with IPS being a measure in the government's mental health strategy from 2020 to 2030 (Sipilä and Appelqvist-Schmidlechner 2024). In addition, daily care centers and voluntary organizations have also provided SE services in Finland for several years (Spjelkavik 2012). There have been less SE adoption in Denmark compared to the other countries, although several municipalities have been working for years with IPS (Bonfils 2022). While both public and private sectors are involved in the SE approach in the Nordic countries, the public sector generally seems to play a more central role in coordinating and supporting SE initiatives. Besides, the involvement of the private sector often hinges on incentives and support from public mechanisms (Bonfils 2021; Hasson et al. 2011).

The shift toward SE services in Norwegian employment services (NAV) provide a valuable opportunity for studying the switch from train-place to place-train services and to increase understanding of organizational culture as a factor affecting implementation and sustainment processes. The NAV offices are multi-purpose 'one-stop shops'



(Minas 2014) providing integrated employment and welfare services, including social assistance, social security, and employment services. NAV's policy goals include helping more people enter the workforce, better and more effective meetings with clients, and closer cooperation with employers (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs 2015–2016). To meet policy requirements for improved contact with employers and individualized service delivery, many offices have established SE services as part of the in-house follow-up program. Program goals include improved employer orientation and provision of comprehensive service delivery to clients with complex needs.

The SE method has been implemented through a rather top-down process initiated by the central directorate in NAV, the Labour and Welfare Administration. In NAV, SE services are structured according to either 'The Quality Guide' ('Kvalitetsveilederen') guidelines, or IPS guidelines (Bakkeli et al. 2020). The case offices in this article, office A and office B, follow the Quality guide and IPS, respectively. While there are some differences between the two versions of SE, such as IPS services being integrated in health services and based on a more comprehensive manual. On the whole, however, there are important similarities between the two versions that in our view makes it relevant to treat them as similar examples of a place-train approach. Both versions are based on the core SE principles of using ordinary workplaces as integration arena, individual client follow-up and support, small client portfolios up to 20 clients, orientation to client motivation and needs, and so on. They are both structured by a scale tool, with the 15-point Quality Guide scale being based on the 25-point IPS scale. While the Quality Guide is simplified and contains fewer points, there are many similarities in terms of how the scale is structured, the points system, and how the services are evaluated. Central activity measures (i.e., time spent outside and number of employers visited) are the same in the two versions. Although the Quality Guide is less comprehensive, recent research has found NAV offices and managers have interpreted the quality guide as a rigid framework with an emphasis on activity measures and goal achievement (Skjold and Lundberg 2022). Furthermore, the teams in the two SE versions are similarly organized, with two or more employment specialists combined with a method supervisor. While IPS services originally are focused on clients with moderate to severe mental illnesses, services in the inhouse follow-up program based on IPS also have broader client groups. Likewise, the 'Quality Guide'-based SE teams work with wider client groups, including youth, immigrants, and people with disabilities.

In Table 1, the two service delivery models are summarized. The main frontline worker role in NAV—the counselor—is responsible for different tasks—for example, administering welfare benefits, conducting work health assessments, choosing between different activation measures, and providing employment-oriented follow-up. Traditionally, they have been working within a train-place approach, which also involves extensive use of client's receiving follow-up services in external activation measures. Counselors handle relatively large client caseloads, and their tasks are generally standardized and procedural, defined by national laws, regulations, directives, and ICT systems. Frontline workers in the SE inhouse follow-up program are called 'employment specialists'. Compared to counselors, employment specialists provide comprehensive and individualized follow-up oriented toward clients' employment and have an outward orientation to workplaces and employers. They also collaborate with counselors, who are responsible for administrative follow-up (including finances and welfare benefits).

Table 1 Comparison of the regular service model with the SE-based model

	Traditional service model ('train-place' approach)	SE intervention ('place-train' approach)
Organizing principles	National directives, standardized ICT systems and procedural tools, activity management	Adherence to SE guidelines, quality scale, and manuals
Service philosophy	Train-place: gradual approach to work includes prevocational training in sheltered workshops, transitional employment, skills training, and other preparatory activities	Place-train: users placed in ordinary employment of their choice without extensive preparation and receive employment support based on individual needs
Main frontline role	Generalist counselors	Specialist role: employment specialists (collaborating with generalist counselors)
Frontline work content	Inward orientation: standardized production, assessment and categorization of clients, referring clients to external activation providers, limited follow-up tasks	Outward orientation: individualized follow-up of clients and employers
External/internal service model	Use of external service providers (e.g., sheltered work enterprises, contracted providers)	In-house, integrated employment specialist service teams in the offices
Collaboration with employers	Limited contact. Gradual, stepwise approach based on train-place, limited follow-up	Extensive contact and employer orientation. Boundary-spanning and brokerage tasks, employer engagement, and workplace support
Caseload per frontline worker*	45–130	15–20

*Caseload per frontline worker in standard service model based on data from Fossetøl et al. (2020).

Analysis

The paradigm shift: From train-place to place-train

In this section, we examine—with the help of Schein's (2010) organizational culture theory—how the train-place approach was first embedded and then remained in vocational rehabilitation services.

The train-place approach has been used for several decades and, to some extent, likely cemented the practice in vocational rehabilitation (Frøyland and Spjelkavik 2014). According to the train-place service philosophy, participants need peace and time, to take 'one step at a time', and to avoid finding work too quickly in the ordinary labor market (Spjelkavik 2014). This approach is rooted in the belief that using the sheltered workshops and training to prepare and upskill participants to make them ready for work is the right way to reach policy employment goals (Gjertsen et al., 2021;



Nøkleby et al., 2017). This attitude can be linked to the traditional medical approach where treatment is based on ‘rest and respite’, and vocational rehabilitation is more ‘disease-oriented’ than coping-oriented.

The shared experiences and assumptions in the organization can be considered a kind of ‘autopilot’ (Schein 2010). And it steers both the direction and the focus of the caseworkers’ attention without them being fully aware of this. The common assumptions are based on experiences about what works (‘train’ and ‘upgrading’ of participants) and what creates reasonable solutions for external adaptation and internal integration problems. How the case management is carried out depends on the caseworkers’ experiences, decision-making opportunities, and basic assumptions created over time, providing a cultural framework for train-place work processes. These experiences assume a ‘taken for granted’ character and operate on an unconscious level, which means it becomes unthinkable for the caseworker to find other solutions than those within the culture’s framework (Schein 2010).

The train-place work approach is introduced to a new employee in the ‘meeting phase’. Through a ‘metamorphosis’ process—based on the internal interaction between employees (internal integration)—the newly hired caseworker is socialized, which contributed to the culture’s maintenance. (McShane and Von Glinow 2015). When faith, attitude, and the way of working (train-place approach) are internalized based on both social and personal beliefs) and become part of the common basic assumptions and normative guide, it becomes unthinkable for caseworkers to find other solutions and ways of working than what lies within the normative framework of culture. Over time, the actions in the organization acquire a ‘taken for granted’ character that is difficult to adjust and to see the need for change in terms of behavior (Schein 2010).

The train-place approach is not necessarily effective in terms of job attainment, but it makes sense in the daily activities of caseworkers and job seekers. The satisfaction of participants who have less work experience or have been inactive for a long period also reinforce this approach, as they are activated in some way—which was the goal (Møller and Sannes, 2009; Schafft and Spjelkavik, 2011). The prevailing belief is that, over time, participants will get a job in the ordinary labor market. The participants’ experiences—as referrers—thus reinforce internalized normative pressures in the employees, like a feedback loop.

Regarding employer collaboration, the caseworker may experience contradictory role understanding and a conflict of loyalties (Gioia et al. 2013). On the one hand, the caseworker is a collaborative and equal partner in the interaction with employers. On the other hand, they represent the authorities that grant and control the support schemes given to employers (e.g., mentoring schemes or wage subsidies). The employers therefore may not have seen NAV as an equal partner, but perhaps rather as a bureaucratic controller. However, this asymmetrical relationship—between the employers and caseworker—has existed long enough to be perceived as ‘true and valid’.

In addition, reproduction can be enhanced by structural conditions (national principles, rules, and regulations): for example, by the fact that health conditions are still essential for assessing participation in vocational rehabilitation measures and receiving income security. This indicates a focus on users’ disease status and limitations that contradict the empowerment-based, person-centered SE method’s focus on

participants' residual work capacity and the ethos that 'anyone who wishes to work can work, provided the correct level of support is available' (European Union of Supported Employment 2010a).

To sum up, changing the incorporated 'truth' in an organization takes time, and this can reinforce the slowness of change. The slowness of change is explained by Schein (2010), who states that the strong culture provides structural stability and predictability for organization members, but also becomes self-reinforcing. Therefore, it is natural to expect that implementing the *place-train* approach requires time and involves contradictions with existing organizational culture. The change will (first) occur when the new approach is considered a 'success', when new employees are socialized into this culture, and when the new approach replaces the traditional way of thinking and becomes part of the organization's history.

Advantages and risks of four cultural profiles and SE implementation combinations

In the second segment of the analysis, we focus on dominant cultural profiles in different NAV offices and how this may influence local enactment of SE in each site, by utilizing Cameron and Quinn's Competing Values Model (Cameron et al., 2012; Quinn, 1988). As implementation research has shown, local actors interpret policy programs when implementing them in the local context (Johansson et al., 2015; Nordesjö, 2020; Vossen and Van Gestel, 2019). Hence, it is crucial to explore how different organizational cultures affect the implementation of SE.

The four cultural profiles may lead to different implementations of the SE approach, focusing on the advantages and risks of each combination, as outlined in Figure 1. The main argument is that each combination involves a set of advantages and risks. First, the SE approach combined with a dominant *market* profile has advantages related to a strong result orientation and a strong orientation to the market and employers. However, the risk of having too narrow a focus on short-term results may lead to the creaming of clients² and collaboration problems. Second, SE mixed with the *clan culture profile* may have advantages concerning positive professional development, high service motivation, and the advancement of holistic, high-quality client follow-up, but risks related to lacking performance pressure leading to low caseload throughput and waiting lists and service efficiency problems. Third, SE implemented in an office with a *hierarchical* organizational culture has advantages related to high efficiency, strong documentation and accountability routines, and strong adherence to SE approach rules. However, there are risks such as reduced discretion for the employment specialists and overly rigid rule-following. Last, SE, in conjunction with the *adhocratic profile*, may promote an entrepreneurial orientation characterized by flexibility, disruption, and change. This can involve a flexible and externally oriented approach to clients and employers. Risks related to low efficiency due to inadequate service organization, low adherence to SE rules, and lack of accountability.

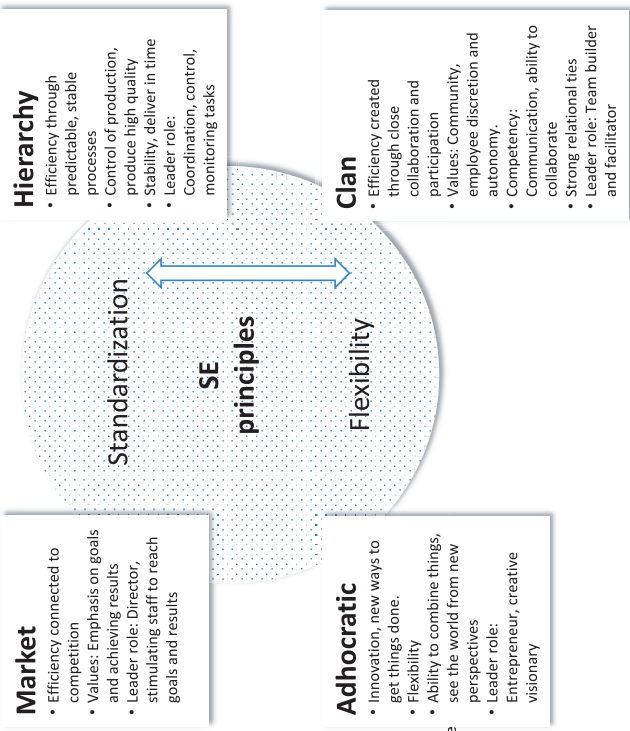
In the following, we illustrate the theoretical argument by drawing on empirical material from two different NAV offices, which are aligned with two cultural profiles: market and clan.



Figure 2 Advantages and risks with four cultural profiles and SE implementation combinations.

Market illustration: Office A

- Advantages**
- Strong goal orientation can create positive focus and results
 - Adherence to SE intervention rules and performance targets promote focus on core tasks
 - Energetic staff with high service motivation
- Risks**
- Stressful work environment due to competitive pressure
 - Short-term results and easy-to-place clients are prioritized at the expense of sustainable work placements and clients with complex problems



Market

- Efficiency connected to competition
- Values: Emphasis on goals and achieving results
- Leader role: Director, stimulating staff to reach goals and results

Hierarchy

- Efficiency through predictable, stable processes
- Control of production, produce high quality
- Stability, deliver in time
- Leader role: Coordination, control, monitoring tasks

Adhocratic

- Innovation, new ways to get things done.
- Flexibility
- Ability to combine things, see the world from new perspectives
- Leader role: Entrepreneur, creative visionary

Clan

- Efficiency created through close collaboration and participation
- Values: Community, employee discretion and autonomy.
- Competency: Communication, ability to collaborate
- Strong relational ties
- Leader role: Team builder and facilitator

Advantages

- Adherence to SE intervention rules and performance targets promote efficiency and predictability
- Strong documentation and accountability routines

Risks

- Reduced discretion
- Rigid rule-following creates lack of flexibility
- Conflicts between managers and employees

Advantages

- Centering of professional development
- Personalized, high quality client follow-up through broad, holistic approach
- High service motivation

Risks

- Limited focus on performance measures lead to low caseload throughput, growing waiting lists, lack of service control and accountability
- Difficult to focus on core tasks and uphold professional boundaries
- Service efficiency problems due to low adherence to SE intervention rules

Clan illustration: Office B



Market culture in Office A

The market culture case focuses on the employment specialist team in a NAV office, and the empirical material comes from the INNOWEL research project (see Bakkeli, 2022b; Bakkeli and Breit, 2022). The office was organized into three departments and staff was around 50 employees. The team consisted of 1 supervisor³ and around 14 employment specialists. The basic assumption in the market model is that efficiency is connected to the competition. Central values include an orientation toward goals, achieving results, and activities encouraging motivation and commitment to the team and goals. Leaders are directors who boost, stimulate, and motivate staff to improve and move forward, toward better results. They are often competitive.

In this case, a strong goal orientation was combined with a competitive approach in the team. Informants noted that the competitive focus motivated them to improve in the role: 'I am very focused on doing a good job, and I want it to be made visible' (employment specialist). There was considerable focus on individual practitioner results, as these were presented in weekly team meetings: 'In the meetings, we go through how many employers, time outside and all that. We aim for 40% [percentage of office hours out in community]. It is not cool to be the one with only 20' (employment specialist). This results orientation was also visually present in the office space, as team leaders wrote weekly results with a marker in a large table on a whiteboard: 'They [the results] come up on the board and are visible for my colleagues. [...] So it's obvious if you do not do your job very well' (employment specialist). This table can be interpreted as a strong visual symbol, which accentuates competition, goals, and results in the organization.

Strong adherence to the SE approach guidelines characterized the team. This promoted a focus on core tasks related to employers and finding jobs for participants. The supervisor put considerable emphasis on following the rules because this was seen as necessary to achieve results:

From the bottom-up, we have the method at the top of our mind, and they're drilled in the scale and the method. And that's the foundation for everything we do and all themes we bring up. We don't do anything else than that. (method supervisor)

This supervisor also stressed the importance of being hands-on as a leader and staying close to the team in order to sustain positive relational dynamics and develop positive results:

I know I need to stay very close to this to make it good and not bad. Because if you don't follow up closely, it can go really bad. [...] can easily develop envy, and alliances. So, we need to continuously make sure that people have a good time and get recognition in their work. That they feel attended to and can develop. (team leader)

While there were team discussions and critical reflection regarding the rules, there was generally a strong cultural emphasis on following and not deviating from the principles: 'This is the way we should work, period. [...] Research has shown this works! So it's no good to start arguing about everything' (employment specialist). This also involved a focus on core tasks and it was a concern for the team to not get too involved or work too broadly with client follow-up because this could impact efficiency and results. Instead,



informants distributed non-core tasks to other frontline workers (e.g., administrative work and handling welfare benefits and housing issues).

The SE approach implemented in an organizational setting with a dominant market culture model also involved clear risks, like a stressful workplace. Most informants viewed performance measurements as an integrated part of the workplace. However, they acknowledged that not everyone would tolerate this: ‘Here you need to accept being controlled and measured. And if you cannot tolerate that, maybe it’s not the right job’ (employment specialist). Some informants, however, reacted to the high work pressure, in particular with regard to the relatively rigid way the individualized performance management scheme was enacted:

The results are so individual, creating a big pressure you need to deal with. It’s challenging—you get these highs and lows in periods where you’re not so successful. [...] You know you will be watched, in this job. (employment specialist)

In this case, the cultural emphasis on performance was also combined with limited acceptance from leaders regarding employees who were unable to do their ‘best’ or were struggling with motivation.

Clan culture in Office B

This illustration draws on a case study of an SE extended follow-up service in a frontline NAV office (Bakkeli et al. 2020). The NAV office consists of three departments with 60 employees. The employment specialist team comprises one method supervisor and five employment specialists.

The *clan culture* model highlights employee development training, collaboration, teamwork, and sensibility toward clients and partners (Cameron et al. 2012). A basic assumption is that efficiency is created through collaboration. Central values include community, autonomy for the individual employee, development of relational competencies, and the ability to collaborate. In the case of SE-based work, the clan culture model is connected to cooperation with employers and job seekers, close follow-up in the workplace, as well as room for discretion and time for relationship work in the service.

The team’s central values were related to giving employment specialists discretion, autonomy, and trust. In addition, in the interview, the team leader focused on the importance of supportive work to facilitate professional development, with a focus on the quality of client and employer follow-up work. ‘[We] talk a lot about the principles and values [of SE], and are very focused on user involvement. What it means in each case, how to do it better’ (team method supervisor).

The SE approach involves a set of rules that establish boundaries around the service, emphasize work-oriented follow-up activities, and narrow the scope of the service. However, rather than rigidly adhering to these rules, the team reflected on the need to nurture professional reflexivity and perform a more holistic approach to clients: ‘Perhaps I shouldn’t say it out loud, but it [the SE approach rules and manual] doesn’t matter that much. It gives some guidelines and some direction to become better employment specialists. Nevertheless, the work is so much more’ (employment specialist). Informants

emphasized the need to work more broadly on multiple areas to help clients: ‘I’ve helped people with a residence permit, their finances to find housing, apply for kindergarten. Different stuff that’s burning right there and then’ (employment specialist). Informants stressed the need to be flexible, dynamic, and attentive to individual clients’ diverse needs and situations. This broad approach was seen as necessary to develop strong relational ties and community values and create meaningful connections with clients:

If you only focus on work and didn’t talk about other aspects of life, you lose so much. [...] And you care about them. We don’t follow up on their finances and housing and those things just because it gives us information. It makes us happy, it is meaningful, and it’s hard to set boundaries. (employment specialist)

In contrast with the market culture model, the findings in this office illustrate how performance measurement was not in focus. As the method supervisor pointed out:

We have very little focus on numbers here. They report time outside and a number of employer contacts each week, and I have an overview. [...] We never share individual results in meetings, and there’s little focus [on results] in portfolio conversations. (method supervisor)

Team members also did not experience significant performance pressure: ‘We [...] have a quite relaxed relationship to the measurements’ (employment specialist). ‘I don’t experience that we get very negative feedback, like “you didn’t deliver on this or that”—I really don’t’ (employment specialist).

This case can illustrate several risks when implementing the SE approach in an organization characterized by the clan culture model. The team had challenges with achieving results and performance goals concerning work outcomes:

It’s challenging—we don’t deliver on the demands and that’s stressful, especially for new employees. I know we have a long way to go to reach the goals.... (employment specialist).

The limited focus on performance measures seemed to lead to low caseload throughput and growing waiting lists. There were also challenges with limited control and accountability in the service. Another risk was limited adherence to SE approach rules. In particular, informants emphasized that it was difficult to maintain professional boundaries and focus on core tasks. As one informant noted, ‘We had a need, as employment specialists, to limit our work tasks, reduce the role’ (employment specialist). A narrower role focusing on strict work- and workplace-related tasks would also align with the SE approach rules. Lacking adherence to rules while increasing professional autonomy also contributed to a more stressful work situation for employees.

Concluding discussion

In this article, we present a theoretical model suggesting that organizational culture may have a notable impact on the implementation of Supported Employment. The first



part of the analysis focuses on the paradigm shift from train-place to place-train and draws on Schein's (2010) theory. The analysis shows how existing organizational culture influences the implementation of SE approach and explains why this is a challenging process. Existing norms, beliefs, and practices in the organization strongly influence the employees' actions, behavior, and basic assumptions and functioning as a compass. New employees are socialized into this existing organizational culture as well as it taken-for-granted norms, assumptions, and beliefs. In our explicative case—the broad NAV organization—culture was based on common assumptions, such as a stepwise approach to upskilling clients before they are seen as job-ready, the use of sheltered training, and a disease-oriented, medical understanding of client problems and solutions.

The SE approach, in contrast, is based on empowerment ideals, a recovery philosophy, and a focus on a person's resources and potential to work. When the goal is to deliver a more effective measure based on the SE approach (external adaptation), and if the goal is not compatible with existing culture (internal integration), this creates a gap (Bonfils, 2022; Saloviita, 2000). We show how change is difficult and takes time because the existing cultural framework—comprising behaviors that provide structural stability and are developed over decades—makes it challenging for actors to adjust to, believe in, and work in accordance with the new solution. Services in the different Nordic countries have been characterized by the train-place approach (Bonfils, 2022; Fogelgren et al., 2021; Harkko et al., 2023; Sipilä and Appelqvist-Schmidlechner, 2023). One example is in Sweden with the internship culture (Bejerholm et al. 2015). As such, there may be similar tensions between existing organizational culture and new SE service models in employment services across the Nordic countries.

The second part of the analysis draws on Camer and Quinn's competing values model (Cameron et al. 2012) and examines how different organizational culture profiles can be associated with different implementations of the SE approach. Advantages and risks connected to four organizational culture profiles and SE approaches are identified (Figure 2). The four cultural profiles are based on a set of basic assumptions: The market profile emphasizes competition and a strong focus on performance, and the clan profile emphasizes employee involvement, co-creation, and sensibility. The hierarchical profile emphasizes efficiency created through stable processes, and the adhocratic profile is characterized by innovation. Our theoretical argument is illustrated in two cases: the market and clan profiles. This study brings a contrasting perspective to the field by focusing on contradictions between old and new service approaches and revealing possible variations and advantages of risks associated with different cultural profiles in frontline offices.

While previous literature on the implementation of SE approaches has identified contextual, organizational, and individual-level factors that influence implementation (i.e., welfare system regulations, labor market conditions, management and leadership, employment specialist skills and competencies, and user characteristics), the importance of organizational culture has received less attention (Bonfils et al., 2017). The main contribution of this article is to highlight how different organizational culture profiles can shape local SE implementation by identifying the advantages and risks of each combination. Local frontline organizations are characterized by different dominant cultural profiles, and this may influence the interpretation of the SE approach being enacted in the local setting (Harkko et al., 2023; Hasson et al., 2011).

The SE approach is complex and challenging to implement because it contains many elements that can be interpreted, balanced, and prioritized in various ways in different organizational contexts (Saloviita 2000). Flexible aspects include elements like close collaboration with employers and personalized client follow-up. In contrast, more rigid elements include a strong method supervisor role in combination with individual-level performance and activity measurements. While the *market culture* profile promotes competitive actions and performance, and the main goal is to achieve measurable results, the *clan culture* profile highlights collaboration, teamwork, and sensibility toward clients and partners (Cameron et al. 2012). Recent studies have also found that rigid performance management in SE-based measures increases the turnover of job specialists (Schönfelder et al. 2020).

SE implementation is often based on reliance on centrally distributed guidelines and scales (Bergmark et al. 2018; Harkko et al. 2023). Standards guide proper implementation, yet they also need to allow room for interpretation. When viewed from the organizational culture perspective, two alternatives arise when integrating a new model. One is that the interpretation of standards poses a challenge to the dominant organizational profile, thereby generating competing values (e.g., a strong measurement orientation versus empowerment and client-centered service). The other alternative is that the standards are tailored to fit the dominant profile. Suppose we accept that the higher the level of alignment with standards, the more directly it correlates with service efficiency. In that case, if the dominant profile's value system (normative values) is challenged, partially or wholly, this may lead to a deviation from the standards and potentially result in a service and value conflict. Although the profiles are theoretical ideal types that are less clear, overlap, or mix in real organizations, the argument is based on the solid normative endurance of organizational culture and profiles (Schein 2010) that continue to influence new service solutions like the SE approach. Local actors interpret, prioritize, interact, and adjust elements when carrying out new service approaches (Vossen and Van Gestel 2019). When doing so, they not only draw on the existing basic underlying assumptions in the organization and normative frameworks of which they are a part, but also on their own agency and discretion (Nilsen 2015). In contrast with linear conceptions of how interventions are implemented in organizations, the findings also contribute to the literature by stressing the importance of organizational context and culture and how this leads to different implementation styles. We emphasize the critical role of organizational context and culture in fostering diverse implementation styles. This perspective supports the argument for a dynamic approach to implementing the SE approach.

Findings can be useful for administrators and managers by prompting reflection on how the local organizational culture can be developed, aligned, and balanced with the various elements of the SE approach. The cultural profile framework presented in the analysis section may also be useful to identify advantages and risks when enacting SE in daily service provision. We believe this is relevant in different contexts in the Nordic countries and the findings of this study have implications for practice in various types of frontline service organizations.

There are some limitations to this study. First, the study focused on theoretical reflections based on a review of the literature and prior studies, rather than conducting empirical research. Second, the study does not explore the impact of other factors that may influence the implementation of SE, such as funding, welfare system regulations, and labor market conditions. Finally, the study does not examine the impact of



organizational culture on the outcomes of the SE services (i.e., whether some cultural profiles lead to better employment outcomes).

There are also some limitations regarding the case study method. First, its generalizability is limited due to the focus on in-depth analysis of specific sub-units, meaning the results may not be applicable in other contexts or cases. Second, synthesizing findings from the two sub-units into a coherent and meaningful conclusion that effectively relates back to the primary case presents inherent limitations and challenges.

This article is a theoretical contribution that can lead to more extensive empirical studies. Findings prompt several research questions that would be worth investigating. For example, to what extent is there agreement on the norms and values that exist in an organizational culture, and how is this expressed in vocational rehabilitation and interaction with partners? Is a diverse organizational culture influential in NAV's inclusion work? If there are subcultures, what effect does this have on the coordination of cooperation and measures? Empirical studies could help us better understand the extent to which organizational culture is a significant factor concerning the quality of implementation of SE-based approaches.

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Notes

¹The studies on SE use several terms such as model, method, approach, therefore, in this study, we use these terms as synonyms.

²'Creaming' refers to provider behavior that prioritizes attention for unemployed claimants with fewer barriers to work and who are therefore felt to be easier, cheaper, and also more likely to move into paid work and release outcome payments. Carter, E. & Whitworth, A. 2015. Creaming and Parking in Quasi-Marketised Welfare-to-Work Schemes: Designed Out Of or Designed In to the UK Work Programme? *J Soc Policy*, 44(2): 277–296. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0047279414000841>

³A supervisor is instrumental in securing positive program outcomes. This is achieved through the provision of comprehensive training, diligent supervision, and hands-on field mentoring for the staff. Additionally, the supervisor plays a crucial role in monitoring the program's outcomes and spearheading the implementation of quality improvement strategies.