



‘An offer you can refuse’: Municipal Activation from the Employers’ Perspective¹

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ABSTRACT

The Nordic welfare states have a long history of local-level activation to combat unemployment. This study explored how employers perceive and experience the function of municipal activation and its participants. We carried out interviews with 277 Swedish employers. Most employers did not perceive municipal activation centers as a relevant collaboration, though they widely accepted the idea that activation is a constructive method to increase employability. Municipal activation centers are the principal actors behind activation, but many employers perceive themselves as bearing the greater proportion of risk and responsibility. Engaging in activation requires employer resources that rarely lead to subsequent hiring. In the recruitment of low-wage labor, applicants' behavioral traits and motivation are what matter most to employers.

KEYWORDS

activation / Active Labor Market Policy / employer engagement / work placement program

Introduction

Work-first policies have become a success in the global North, but with limited evidence on the gains in establishing people in the labor market (Clasen et al. 2016; Herbst & Benjamin 2016). Instead, researchers have suggested that the policy functions to give applicants of social assistance or unemployment benefits disincentives to claim them (Bonoli 2016; Raffass 2017). This suggests that activation may also function to discipline unemployed persons to accept unattractive employment and low wages (see Green & Sissons 2023). However, in policy documents (see OECD 2021), the core of activation is described as an opportunity to establish people in the labor market. In Sweden, there is a dual labor market policy system. One is for those previously established in the labor market, which qualifies them for the government's rights-based insurance system. The other is for the unemployed served by the remaining welfare benefit system, which is a local-level financed responsibility where activation is implemented by municipal activation centers (MACs).

A participant in municipal activation typically has a disadvantaged position compared to unemployed persons in general, such as having less work experience or health challenges (Forslund et al. 2019). Participants are often activated in low-wage labor sectors to be introduced to potential employers and acquire relevant social and vocational

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skills at no wage cost for employers (Hyggen & Vedeler 2021). Municipal activation practices constitute the institutional field for our analysis. The concept of institutional is used from an understanding that structures and practices are formalized and established within a society through both symbolic and material elements (Thornton et al. 2012, pp. 11, 24). The elements can be understood and acted upon in a taken-for-granted sense and become institutionalized.

This study took its point of departure from a very basic assumption, that is, if the activation for more disadvantaged participants is to function for establishing them in the labor market, there must be employers that want to employ them (Borghouts & Freese 2023, p. 183). A work placement with an employer is one of the few interventions that seems to work in getting some unemployed persons into paid work (Hasluck & Green 2007; Mörk et al. 2022; SBU 2022). Despite this, there is a lack of both theory and research on the demand-side considerations from employers' perspectives and their engagement drivers in activation (Bredgaard & Halkjaer 2016; Ingold & McGurk 2023). Our study, therefore, interviewed 277 employers on their experiences of municipal activation and its participants.

Employer engagement in activation policies has been defined as 'the active involvement of employers in addressing the societal challenge of promoting the labor market participation of vulnerable groups' (Van Berkel et al. 2017, p. 503). When referring to municipal activation practices, we refer to work placements for social assistance recipients. Our studies included employer perceptions of the institutions that implement the municipal activation practices, the MACs.

We take our analytical point of departure in theory on competing institutional logics (Alford & Friedland 1985; Friedland & Alford 1991; Thornton et al. 2012).

The aim is to understand how managers who employ for low-wage positions describe the function of municipal activation. The aim is specified through two research questions:

- (i) *How do employers perceive the relevance of municipal activation centers (MACs) and the participants they hold in meeting their need for labor?*
- (ii) *When are engagement and collaboration in activation challenging from an employer perspective?*

This study has the following structure. The first part provides an overview of previous research and the theoretical perspective. The second part describes the study design, the third part presents the results, and the concluding discussion suggests policy implications.

Research on municipal activation

The dominant feature of municipal activation is its close relation to the means-tested social assistance, which is at its core (see Panican & Johansson 2016). Social assistance in Sweden is a municipal responsibility, and for recipients able to work, activation is mandatory to receive benefits. Disciplining unemployed individuals is central in these supply-side activation practices (Govender 2023; Parsland 2025). The system is politically governed; hence, there is a strong inclination toward what is seen as reducing welfare expenditure and 'passive' benefit receipt (Ds 2024: 29). Substantial variations

exist in how municipalities organize activation (Jacobsson et al. 2017), but the connection to the old poor laws with conditional social assistance means that many MACs also have non-economic rationales. The point of departure for MACs is therefore primarily focused on activating and controlling unemployed persons (Govender 2023).

Recruiting functional staff is essential for employers. Economic rationality is also necessary and often dominant in both private and public employers' decisions: to make a profit in the private firms and to keep within budget in the public. With hiring decisions typically based on limited information provided by the applicants, employers incur various risks when employing (Birkelund 2016; Dalal et al. 2015; Van Belle et al. 2018). If municipal activation is perceived and used as a reliable provider of immediately available staff with references and relevant training, it may reduce employer recruitment costs, risks, and efforts (Ingold et al. 2023; Van der Aa & Van Berkel 2014). Employers aim to avert risks through making well-informed hiring decisions. Municipal activation can therefore function to increase employability if employers trust that its participants possess or acquire relevant skills.

The relation between the MACs and employers should be understood in relation to the transformation toward a post-Fordistic labor market with a dual structure that rewards formal qualifications and social skills (Koch 2017). The labor market, however, is still in demand for labor-intensive sectors, for example, retail, cleaning, and hospitality. These low-wage sectors are characterized by high turnover where staff are easily replaceable and employers are less inclined to recruit applicants who require training.

Theoretical perspectives on competing institutional logics

Logics concern which arguments are legitimate in an institutional field, in this case, the municipal activation practices (Alford & Friedland 1985; Friedland & Alford 1991). It is composed of both cultural rules consisting of symbolic systems like myths, beliefs, ritual practices, and of material practices like control of resources that shape the action on the field. They affect the way different organizations act to gain legitimacy (Dequech 2008; Suddaby & Greenwood 2005). The actors can choose between logics to achieve legitimacy, but the logics should still be institutionalized on the field to be considered valid. There exist different knowledge claims in an institutionalized field, and they can be conflicting, especially when competing for resources. One example is the competing logics between the logics from the MACs trying to convince employers to take on an unemployed person to train them, and the logics of an employer trying to employ persons that require small efforts with as few resources spent as possible.

Logics are concretized through symbols like language or formal goals and through ritualized behaviors in accordance with knowledge within the logic and the field. Logics are mainly about knowledge that is unspoken, rather taken for granted, here described by Friedland and Alford (1991, p. 260): 'The systematic ways in which individuals act out of these logics take on the aura of the natural law, which is not unlike the way in which ordinary individuals themselves experience them'.

Because logics are institutionalized, they are to some degree stable, which gives them a significant role in the field in which they exist. Through institutionalization, they get easily fixed in competitive positions, which can be difficult to break in order to cooperate (Ulmestig & Panican 2021). Organizations have a certain degree of discretion,



even if this is embedded in a normative and cognitively controlled field (see Friedland & Alford 1991). Logics can be contradictory, thus creating conflict and competition between organizations about which logic should be dominant (Bode 2013; Parsland 2025). Logics, as different knowledge claims, exist and compete for power and resources in the field, striving for dominance and subordination of others (Reay & Hinings 2009). To minimize conflict and competition between logics, however, some logics can form a hybrid (Glynn & Lounsbury 2005; Thornton et al. 2012). Our analysis will highlight the perspective of employers as actors and their claims as logics. We also include how employers perceive that their own logics differ or compete with the logics they perceive as typical in municipal activation practices.

Data, methodology, and analytical approach

Study I

To understand the context, aims, and operations of active labor market policies (ALMPs) in the eight municipalities included in our research project, our first step was to conduct informant interviews with their staff responsible for local activation and MACs. The informants provided essential information on which specific sectors and types of employers they collaborated with. They guided us in establishing adequate selection criteria to avoid sample bias, as we only included employers in sectors representative of and typical of municipal activation, see Table 1.

Table 1 Distribution of sectors of interviewed employers

Sectors of interviewed employers	
Industrial production	110
Transport and logistics	15
Retail and hospitality	40
Staffing company	11
Cleaning company	2
Municipal welfare services, e.g., child and elderly care, institutional caterer, gardening	99

The purposive sampling included the criterion that respondents were directly engaged in recruiting for low-wage positions. Respondents were identified through the municipality's website as well as through a search via Google. We contacted employers by telephone. After being assured of confidentiality and obtaining their informed consent, those willing to participate and interested in sharing opinions and experiences of activation were interviewed. The empirical data were separated from all information that could identify respondents. We conducted 277 interviews with employers from the eight Swedish municipalities. There were 167 respondents in the private sector, and the remaining 110 were in the public sector. We used a telephone interview design due to

the COVID restrictions in the fall of 2021. Qualitative research literature often cautions against telephone interviews due to the absence of visual cues and the risk of losing contextual understanding and non-verbal data (Novick 2008). This bias can be contested, however, as there is evidence suggesting that telephone interviews allow respondents to relax and disclose sensitive data more freely (Novick 2008).

The respondents were instructed to focus on their preferences and considerations in recruitment processes for entry-level, low-wage positions as well as their experiences and attitudes towards municipal activation and its participants. The interview consisted of structured survey questions but also included some open-ended questions. Respondents were also encouraged to elaborate and discuss the topics of the structured questions, for example, whether unemployed job applicants seemed to be forced to apply, which generated a more nuanced understanding of employers' opinions and experiences.

We compiled the interview responses and quotes in Google Forms during or directly after the interview. The data were then operationalized so that inclusion in variable categories was coherent and uniform. After this process, they were transferred to SPSS for processing to produce tables for descriptive statistics. We conducted all relevant cross-tabulations of the data to analyze possible variations and patterns, such as municipal size, employment sector, and public or private employer. Few variations proved relevant for these variables, and our conclusion was that the quantitative data were most adequately presented as an entity.

All verbal responses to the open-ended questions and the additional comments from employers were also compiled and then followed by an initial exploration and broad thematic analysis to identify variation and unexpected points of interest from the respondents' comments and experiences (Braun & Clarke 2006; Terry et al. 2017). This initial analysis indicated that employers' perceptions of ALPM programs and their relevance related to employability and staff recruitment were quite diverging from the intentions that motivate municipal activation programs for long-term unemployed (cf. Ds 2024: 29; Parsland 2025). For example, as indicated in the previous research, activation is not primarily an economic rationale for municipalities, as it is for the employers. We identified several competing claims among the employers. At this stage in our research process, we opted for a more abductive approach to enable a theoretical understanding of the seemingly disparate interpretations between the public discourse on the function and mutual gain of ALMPs that contrasted with employers' often dismissive or problematizing perceptions of the MACs (see Alvesson & Sköldbberg 2018). We found various claims in the material that needed to be thematized for us to, on one side, grasp the complexity and on the other side to be organized in themes that are understandable within the limitations of an article. An elaborated understanding was attained through analyzing the employers as actors having diverging claims from the public activation field as competing institutional logics (Friedland & Alford 1991). The different claims made the variations in the competing logics visible. During the iterative process, the analysis involved an interplay between this theory and our empirical data. Although 277 interviews had provided extensive data and context, we identified that a more elaborate understanding of logics and knowledge claims required in-depth qualitative approaches. The analysis, as presented in the article, could not be completed before the interviews in Study 2 were analyzed, and the results from the two studies were merged.



Study 2

To enable a further understanding of the research questions and tentative results from Study 1, we conducted 21 interviews with a sample of the participating employers from Study 1 during fall of 2022. They are referred to as the in-depth interviews (IDIs) (Brinkmann & Kvale 2015) and were selected to correspond to the proportion of sectors as well as public and private employer distribution in the first data set. All respondents in Study 2 had allowed us to contact them for a more extensive follow-up interview. Respondents were contacted by e-mail, and those agreeing to continue their participation were scheduled for their second interview and confirmed their informed consent to participate after assurance of confidentiality and terms as stated in the Swedish Research Council guidelines (2017). We have observed and ensured that data and respondent information were handled in accordance with the applicable regulations and general principles. The studies did not require authorization from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority due to not including any sensitive or identifiable personal data. All data from both studies are stored on a security-protected university server. We did not store any sensitive or identifiable personal data that could be connected to the empirical data. Contact details were stored in a safe on campus.

Eleven women and 10 men were interviewed via videoconference and audio recorded. The files were turned into full verbatim transcripts totaling 203 pages. We again were inspired by the six-step model by Braun and Clarke (2006) for initial exploration, where analysis and coding were conducted by the first author to ensure consistency with Study 1.

Coding included both explicit semantic meanings and latent concepts. The analyses generated 26 separate themes with labeled subcategories supported by excerpts and verbatim quotes from transcripts. The process, however, did not fully adhere to the six-step model, as we also applied a more abductive approach alternating between theory-driven analysis based on institutional logics and re-examining our empirical data and interpretations of competing logics within this field.

The theory helped us to construct cases, initially seven. The cases were then analyzed in relation to Study 1. However, most of the material presented in the article is from Study 2 because the answers were more developed. The concept of hybrid logics was useful to identify how the employers perceived the MACs logic, for example, about disciplining the poor (see Glynn & Lounsbury 2005; Thornton et al. 2005).

In the end, five different cases of competing logics were constructed to meet the aim. Logics also facilitated identifying conflicting and diverging challenges between employers and municipal activation practices within this institutionalized field. The wide range of ambiguities employers expressed regarding municipal activation contributed to understanding the complexities and competing knowledge claims within this field.

A relevant and obvious reservation related to our methodology is the one-sided empirical focus on employer perspectives, while the representatives of municipal actors are missing. As previously discussed, research departing from employers and their perceptions of the functions of activation is scarce, while municipal activation providers have been the subject of extensive studies. Our aim is not a comparative approach but rather analyzing local activation from the employers' perspective, as it is essential to understand what they perceive the municipal activation logics to be, the function of activation and how it may be challenging in relation to employers' own needs and priorities.

Results

Activation is a politically prioritized policy solution among both national and local policy-makers, perceiving it as effective to combat long-term unemployment (Ds 2024: 29; SKR 2024). Our study concludes that when activation is implemented through work placements, employers experience a multitude of challenges as well as several positive opportunities. Employers also navigate substantial risks and competing perspectives and logics on activation practices when collaborating with MACs. We intend to discuss if, when, and how knowledge claims (here exemplified as logics and actual practices) are described by employers as competing between MACs and employers.

First case of competing logics: Divergent perceptions of the function and gain of collaboration in municipal activation practices

A central result is that most of the IDI respondents believed in municipal activation as an effective policy to increase employability and bring a person closer to the labor market, if certain conditions were met. Those conditions will be elaborated throughout this article.

Ideally, municipal activation builds on MACs with close and mutually beneficial collaboration with local employers where participants are a free labor contribution that increases their employability and becomes eligible candidates for subsequent employment. Our results, however, indicate that the MACs and their participants are generally perceived as rather irrelevant to employers' recruitment and that some employers remain passive or quite skeptical.

I mean I'm generally negative towards them and the PES and that stuff. We haven't had that much direct contact more than that I've had someone here on an apprenticeship. But those people didn't want to work anyway, so it was pointless. I don't like to be that person – but I guess the people who are in the program are there for a reason and forced to do a lot of stuff, and I don't feel comfortable around it. (Manager hospitality sector)

Employers often describe activation participants as more of a burden than a solution to recruiting and training prospective staff; yet, an absolute prerequisite for municipal activation is having employers who welcome participants. As employers bear no formal obligation to accept participants, they have the upper hand and can pose conditions; they can expect negotiations to adhere to claims related to the employer's logic. An example from our study is a municipality that finances a tailor-made vocational education requested by employers who agreed to welcome participants on the condition that they have completed the courses. This becomes a legitimizing symbol for when the employer and what they describe as MAC claims support each other and offer legitimacy for both organizations (cf. Friedland & Alford 1991).

Nearly two-thirds of the interviewed employers are not fully aware of their local MAC practices, even though we only interviewed employers in the sectors identified as their primary target. Our general results, therefore, indicate that MACs could build stronger relationships and cooperation with local employers to gain legitimacy, as most respondents are either unaware of or indifferent to their local MAC practices.



The claims and activities of municipal activation are therefore most likely loosely connected to most employers, not affecting everyday recruiting (cf. Friedland & Alford 1991).

The 106 respondents who had knowledge and contacts with MACs often have direct experiences of collaboration and accepting participants, but we could not establish an exact number as some respondents could not recollect details such as distinguishing between PES and municipal participants. Respondents with their own knowledge are most central in the qualitative analysis. The remaining respondents who were not acquainted with their specific local MACs were still generally aware of activation for the unemployed and shared their attitudes on this topic, which contributed valuable insights regarding recruitment preferences and opinions on activation and its participants.

Among the 106 employers that were familiar with MACs, 55% were positive about their work, and the remaining were either negative or indifferent. On a direct question however, as few as 16% of the 277 respondents had employed a former activation participant. Prospects for post-employment were higher among public employers.

These results, however, cannot be entirely interpreted as general hesitation from employers to recruit persons with a marginalized position on the labor market, as it is also common for these employers to be engaged in offering opportunities and second chances.

You know, I try to remain neutral and not judge anyone based on what they have been going through. Because anyone can end up in a situation like that where you must find a way back into the labor market. Then we must be there for them in my opinion. (IDI 21 Manager institutional caterer elderly care)

On the contrary, our data show that these employers actually have hired persons belonging to categories that often are less attractive to employers, such as young persons for their first job (78%), people with no experience of the Swedish labor market (63%), and persons who stood far from the labor market (37%).

Frequently, activation participants are stereotypically categorized as poor-quality candidates by employers (cf. Ingold et al. 2023). A common logic among our respondents is that activation participants are unmotivated, as they are presumed to be forced by authorities to send out numerous applications. Some employers therefore reject these applicants and avoid publicly announcing openings, and find alternative recruitment solutions.

The 21 in-depth follow-up interviews (IDI) revealed that for the vast majority, contact with MACs was not frequent. Some described previous disappointments, for example, criticizing MACs for not being honest regarding participants' competence.

We had higher expectations. Those from the MAC try to sell them to us, saying that they will pay their wage and that we more or less should consider them as a regular employee. So, we do our scheduling according to that, but then they don't show up or are very often sick. Then you feel, you can't count on them. (IDI 13 Manager preschool)

The excerpt illustrates a central, obvious area of competing logics. The primary goal for municipalities is built on aspiring to activate and increase employability for participants to avoid 'passive' benefit receipt, which is politically and financially undesirable and perceived as detrimental to long-term unemployed persons (SKR 2024).

‘Sometimes it feels too much like, “Just get them out of here; it doesn’t matter where. Oh, thank you, can you take them, that’s great.” That’s all that counts. Instead of really thinking, will this be a good match?’ (IDI 4 Manager industry).

The foundation of the MAC logic, as understood by the employers, is to get unemployed persons ‘off the dole’ financed by municipalities. From an employer logic, however, it was obvious that access to reliable, productive labor took precedence over contributing to reducing municipal welfare expenses. This is an obvious case of competing logics with significant bearing on the possibility of MAC participants getting employed.

However, there is also logic that doesn’t compete. One-third of the IDI respondents had well-functioning collaboration with MACs describing a relationship where consensus of logics prevailed. Several of the positive and engaged employers who valued MACs and welcomed its participants also held altruistic intentions as a major driving force. ‘In the beginning, I guess we just do it because we want to help. And give a person a second chance’ (IDI 3 Manager industry).

Altruistic intentions are easier to find when they have strong ties to the company’s values and normative goals in corporate social responsibility (see Moore et al. 2023; Simms 2017). Also, Hanson and Moore (2023) point out that external pressure on employers can make them more responsive to hiring unemployed persons with high thresholds for entering the labor market.

Most employers, however, describe that handling a competitive and demanding reality requires them to be task-oriented and prioritize results and operational functionality.

This may not be a nice thing to say, but we are not the Red Cross. We are in business to make a profit, so we will primarily focus on profit. So, if this is not adapted to our needs, then we must move on and give it to someone who can do the job better. (IDI 12 Manager fast food restaurant)

The majority of the interviewed IDI employers claimed to have dual motivation to engage in municipal activation practices, combining their good intentions while also fulfilling a social responsibility as a good local employer (cf. Ingold et al. 2023; Hyggen & Vedeler 2021). The dual drivers have also been established in previous studies claiming that willingness to accept participants often stems from emotional intrinsic motivation that extends beyond means-end calculations (Bredgaard & Halkjaer 2016; Ingold et al. 2023).

Second case of competing logics: Employers are expected to offer activation in ‘unskilled’ positions that hardly exist

A key factor affecting municipal activation is the development toward a more demanding labor market (Green & Sissons 2023). The respondents represented low-wage sectors requiring little formal competence, as MACs typically approach those. Nonetheless, the very notion of ‘simple jobs’ was rejected by many IDI respondents who explained that unqualified positions are close to extinct. Some employers claim that MACs hold an outdated, simplistic understanding of the contemporary labor market. The employers emphasize that growing expectations related to productivity, security standards, and



digitalization require multiple social competencies, language proficiency, and potential for versatility and acquisition of new skills. The increasing service sector may be perceived as ideal for unqualified labor, but several employers emphasized that social skills are essential in these occupations and that municipal participants often display poor social competence.

Industrial sector respondents also reproached the notion of 'simple jobs' as degrading and disrespectful, claiming that MACs have an obsolete and ignorant understanding. "There is this prejudice in society that anyone could work at an industry. "If you can't find anything else, you can always apply there." But today, it's quite advanced to work at an industry' (IDI 4 Manager industry).

MACs had often approached municipal care facilities for preschool children or vulnerable elderly as potential recipients of participants. Respondents in these sectors were often frustrated and even offended by the suggestion that 'anyone' could manage the complex tasks of caring. A preschool manager describes being annoyed with the local MAC trying to place unsuitable participants.

I have been working in preschools for 30 years, and it has increasingly become perceived as a place for storing. It's a bit better now, but there still seems to be an attitude that if someone likes children, then they can be at the preschool. It doesn't work like that anymore. (IDI 16 Manager preschool)

These diverging perceptions are built upon the different knowledge claims in these two competing logics of what the labor market requires and what competences are desirable or necessary. There is a risk that the MAC logics on unskilled positions are based on a myth that the employers don't recognize, making the MAC not relevant when forming an activation that is not legitimate from the respondents' perspective.

Third case of competing logics: Production or activation?

A distinct pattern in this study is that employers focus on personal traits as the most decisive feature in their recruitment decisions. The 277 interviewed employers were asked for three factors they identified as important when recruiting for jobs that do not require formal competence. Table 2 shows that the vast majority identified behavioral aspects to be of profound importance and of much higher relevance than having a driver's license or physical capabilities.

Table 2 Most important factors for employers when recruiting for an entry-level position

Most important factors for employers when recruiting	
Motivation	157
Right personality	127
Competence/experience	100
Social competence	85
Language skills	72

Most important factors for employers when recruiting

Hard-working	46
Diligent	45
Right fit with team	38
Potential for development	31
Flexible	25
Conscientious	25
References	17
Loyalty	13
Honesty on CV	11
Share values with employer	11

The result from Study 1 led us to elaborate on the understanding in the qualitative interviews, which substantially confirmed this employer preference. Having the ‘right personality’ and attitude were considered instrumental prerequisites. The most desired trait by far is motivation in both studies. Thus, employers can hesitate to recruit activation participants, as our studies conclude that they often perceive or imagine applicants associated with municipal activation to be unmotivated or forced to apply. This context has roots in the old mandatory poor laws demanding work contributions from social assistance recipients (see Panican & Johansson 2016). Activation as a *quid pro quo* for welfare benefits is most likely irrelevant to employers’ logics, given that they prioritize finding motivated, productive staff with socially desirable traits. Here are the competing knowledge claims in logics obvious in the struggle to dominate the field (see Bode 2013; Reay & Hinings 2009). The employer wants motivation, but the MACs also prioritize the unemployed to be active.

In response to a direct question, as many as 74% of our larger sample have experienced that unemployed applicants have been forced by authorities to apply for a position with them, which they generally perceived as negative in the recruitment process. A substantive source of irritation was the quite common experience of ‘fake applications’ from applicants (who, to be eligible for benefits, must send out a mandatory number of job applications). ‘It’s negative when we recruit truck drivers, and a lot of those who apply don’t even have a driver’s license. It is such a waste of time for us’ (Transport sector manager).

The ‘fake applications’ can be seen as what Dall et al. (2023) describe as a tool for the supplier of municipal activation to pursue the goal of activated participants. From a MAC logic, this strategy can be productive. Ingold’s study (2020) also emphasizes that employers’ limited reliance on public employment services stems from negative experiences of receiving large numbers of poorly targeted, unsuitable, and unfiltered job applications.

From an employer’s logic, the ‘fake’ applications signaled that activation participants were unwilling, and to some employers, this perception decreased the legitimacy and probability for further cooperation with MACs. Some employers question the MACs’ credibility due to this practice and interpret it as a sign that MACs are disconnected from the reality of the labor market; some employers describe how they strategically avoid recruiting staff through any public channel.



I had an ad posted recently. I got 130 applicants, around 100 were completely irrelevant, not educated, no experience. It makes you reluctant to post any ads in the future, as it takes an enormous amount of time to go through. (Manager at a municipal preschool)

Employers who identify motivation as the primary condition for employment most likely reject activation participants when they are perceived as the opposite, involuntarily activated or forced to apply for job positions. Participation in MACs may thus become a signal effect (see Dalal et al. 2015; Liechti et al. 2017).

While the employer logic is about getting information about an applicant's personality and abilities that lessen the risks within recruiting (Birkelund 2016; Van Belle et al. 2018), the MAC logic is, according to our respondents, about hoping for the participant to be active and develop the ability to work (cf. Dall et al. 2023).

Overall, the employer narrative surrounding the participants often departs from a problem-oriented understanding, where employers are hesitant to commit due to past experiences or concerns that long-term unemployed people in municipal activation are 'trouble' and unmotivated. An industry manager (IDI 4) concludes this:

You want staff that come to work, do their job, and then go home. That's what you want; then you also want them all to feel happy and comfortable. If you are an employer that cares, if you end up with a person that has some problems, then it means a lot of engagement for you, trying to solve, help, and support.

When employers perceive that MACs lack competence in preparing participants on how employers expect participants or employees to behave, it can be devastating for legitimacy in the employer's logic. The employer perspective often describes that participants are lacking basic understanding of labor market requirements, such as being on time, social skills, adapting to cultural norms, and displaying work discipline. In addition to reduced legitimacy of MACs, employers also describe that it affects whether the participant gets good references. These ideas may become the very core of the knowledge claims about the unemployed and the employer's logic. Various behaviors are perceived as necessary to correct; therefore, employers often perceive that their function is to offer a norm-setting environment where desired cultural and behavioral standards and expectations are applied in a real setting.

In the MAC logic, disciplining the poor is a strong and basic function (Govender 2023). In this sense, disciplining and norm setting become a common function for employers and MACs. Despite this commonality, it never fully becomes a full hybrid (see Glynn & Lounsbury 2005; Thornton et al. 2005), as employers do not perceive it as their responsibility to enforce basic discipline. A manager at a municipal preschool (IDI 16) explained how draining it was.

We had to take over and foster this person. "You have to come to work. You can't stay home for minor issues, because we depend on you." It was completely basic things about how to function in a workplace, and we had to do it.

Employers were often genuinely engaged and caring in relations toward participants, but often do not perceive them as job-ready and employable, as the employer logic must factor in productivity demands. The employers often interpreted the activation as

training and explained that this seemed to deviate from the MAC logic, whose expectation often had been that the participant could be employed post-placement. These diverging and competing institutional logics often resulted in tensions.

Fourth case of competing logics: What MACs define as an offer may become a risk or liability for employers

Activation is based on a voluntary relationship between MACs and employers, where ideally, mutual gain is derived. The participant is expected to conduct work tasks for employers at no wage cost, which could potentially be an ideal arrangement from an employer's perspective. The interviews account for many positive experiences in which an activation participant became a highly valued coworker. However, the opportunity for making a hybrid logic generally seems challenging (see also Glynn & Lounsbury 2005; Thornton et al. 2005) as employers in this study emphasize that taking on activation participants entails balancing several risks. The lack of a hybrid logic, which reduces the competition between MACs and employer logic, creates the risk that participants of MACs are perceived as a liability and become something that is taken for granted as a truth (Friedland & Alford 1991).

The employers' primary concern was the investment of engagement, which can be understood in relation to our sample of low-wage labor where employers rarely invest in any extensive training (see Green & Sissons 2023). A fast-food restaurant manager (IDI 12) explained that saving money by having unpaid participants is an illusion.

I must invest extra time as a manager in conversations; it can be to follow up. Perhaps I can't speak to them the same way as I do with all the other employees. I can't have the expectation on that person as on everybody else. You shoot yourself in the leg; you don't really save any money on this. What you actually do is that you try to help another human being to get an actual job.

The costs and risks did not always outweigh potential gain for the interviewed employers, as accepting a participant holds an unpredictable outcome (see Bredgaard 2018). All participants require an initial investment of resources, as employees must divert time to workplace introduction. Managers strived to avoid disruptions for their regular staff, who were stressed by the constant surveillance of unskilled or ignorant participants. Averting risk is a primary objective in care facilities and industrial production, and participants who cannot cope with the pace, routines, and quality procedures can disrupt daily operations and cause severe security risks.

I talk about it with the head of production if we have a potential activation candidate. Then we discuss this. OK, yes, we help someone, but can this person be of any use and do we have the energy right now? Can we muster the dedication to support him in relation to the situation in our company? (IDI 7 Manager in industrial production)

The manager further elaborates by emphasizing that if, after months of invested time from the employer, the participant cannot perform the work or just leaves, then they have made a failed investment. Frequent absence or low motivation among participants is considered a frustrating experience.



There is no time to work with those that need support 75 % of their working time. We don't have time if they suffer from mental health problems certain periods. You want to help, but you can't help them all. Then perhaps it is better that they stay with the MAC and on welfare instead of coming here where they can't manage and then fail. (Manager elderly care)

Other deterrents were the potential for future 'trouble' and the concern that the participant may become a liability. If the participant had several prior work placements, employers often perceived it as a 'red flag' or signal of a deviation or defect that led them to scrutinize the participant. They were eager to understand *why* the applicants were repeatedly rejected after activation participation (see Van der Aa & Van Berkel 2014).

In the process of accepting a participant, employers believe it is fair for municipalities to be transparent about a participant's limitations. Employers were motivated by a sense of legitimate entitlement to be proactive and informed regarding realistic expectations and potential difficulties. The obvious risk for the MACs, however, is that if they present potential participants as not 'job-ready', chances are that the employer rejects them (see Larsen & Vesan 2012; Wiggan & Knuth 2023). Based on the MAC logic, this balance can differ from the employer's logic. The MAC logic is based upon wanting to activate, support, and believe in the participants, devoid of the same economic and operational rationale as the employers' logic (Ingold et al. 2023). Dall et al. (2023, p. 109) term this strategy as 'place then train approaches', a practice many of the interviewed employers avoid, as their logic emphasizes averting risk. The result is a conflict or competition between logics. Accepting an activation participant may be 'too costly' even if they are free.

Fifth case of competing logics: Enabling hybrid logics and employers' key prerequisites for engaging in municipal activation

When different knowledge claims cannot gain full domination in the activation field, conflicts and competition between logics can be handled through forming a hybrid logic that eases tensions and conflicts on the field (Glynn & Lounsbury 2005; Thornton et al. 2005). Moore et al. (2023) emphasize that employers are crucial for getting unemployed people with high thresholds into the labor market. In developing activation measures, it is therefore instrumental to integrate employers' perspectives and, in that sense, construct a hybrid logic. The hybrid logic can ease the contradictions between MACs and employers' knowledge claims.

Our analysis indicates that employers quite often experience that the terms they stipulated were not met by the MAC, which causes them frustration and hesitation toward future engagement. Neglect of demand-side considerations has cast employers more as gatekeepers or passive recipients of participants, instead of including them as proactive, strategic partners engaged in co-production of activation programs (Orton et al. 2019; Van Berkel 2021; Van der Aa & Van Berkel 2014).

Based on our empirical findings, the following issues constitute terms and conditions identified by employers as prerequisites to be invested and committed to cooperate with MACs and accept participants. We understand this to be a willingness to establish a hybrid logic.

Several employers claim that it would be reasonable to be compensated for productivity loss and time invested in mentoring, supervision, and introduction of activation participants. 'We are a small company, then we need a supervisor that almost, when an intern is here, is a 100 % dedicated to support, and we don't have the money or the resources for that.' (IDI 7 Manager industry)

Another key prerequisite for developing a hybrid logic is a relationship characterized by trust. Transparency regarding the participant's abilities, competence level, and language skills is deemed essential for realistic expectations. Employers' experiences of MACs being so eager to get a person activated that they seemed to be overselling and exaggerating participants' competence were coined by some employers as deceitful and coercive, which further exacerbated employer skepticism (see also Larsen & Vesan 2012).

The guy that was here through them required a lot of energy and was far from independent. None of us had time for him and to support him with what he needed. He had low self-confidence, and I didn't have time to help and was sometimes a bit irritated and that didn't feel good at all. They are quite obtrusive and stubborn, those who want to place them in workplaces. According to the person from the municipality, well, it was false marketing, because they described him as significantly more independent than he was.

(Manager industrial sector)

Experiencing inaccurate descriptions of participants reinforces how the MAC logic may affect the perceived competence of unemployed individuals, thereby influencing the decision to hire (Bredgaard 2018). Employers recalled with irritation being stuck and feeling abandoned by MACs, with a 'hopelessly incompetent and unmotivated participant'. Employers require accountability from MACs.

You know what, I am being really crude. The MAC wants us to help them, and then it is pretty much up to us to take responsibility for the participants, and the MAC perhaps does a yearly follow-up. They just care that the person is activated, and then everything lies in my lap even if it isn't my responsibility. (Preschool manager)

Honesty is also expected from MAC, providing the participant with realistic expectations. Employers may agree to accept a participant, but often had no intention or possibility to recruit, which they assumed the MAC had explained prior to the placement. If the situation had not been communicated, it could result in disappointment and psychological distress for the participant. Employers who had experienced this and the mutual emotional hurt thought it was unfair that they were cast as the villain. This is not a good prerequisite for forming a hybrid logic.

In situations where things do not work out, or participants are too demanding, some employers expressed that they need the right to terminate the placement.

As I said, it often costs more time and energy than what we get in return. We must know what is expected from us, how long, and if there is a possibility to end the placement if it doesn't work. (IDI 16 Preschool manager)



For a functioning cooperation with MACs, employers also set the condition of having an appointed, accessible contact who follows up, intervenes, and takes responsibility when problems arise. A manager in an elderly care facility (IDI 17) describes the problematic cooperation.

The MAC never gets in touch, so you don't know – OK what is happening, with a contract that is prolonged by three-month intervals. What happens after that? What are we thinking? Follow-ups from their side have not occurred; so no, it feels more as if I'm the one that keeps contacting them to check on things.

Employers perceive it as unfair if MACs 'dump' a vulnerable person who may have severe mental health impairments and expect employers to handle this. In order to avoid breakdowns that are hurtful for the participant, employers stress that a thorough match-making process can prevent ill-considered placements. 'I think that if you have another failure thrown in your face, it doesn't serve the person well. If you are frail and more vulnerable already, you shouldn't be treated that way' (IDI 19 Manager elderly care).

Several employers suggest that instead of MACs placing participants prematurely, it would be constructive to provide education, preferably validated courses or training adapted to the needs identified by employers. Employers emphasize that public upskilling or vocational training can be implemented as a strategic tool to reduce the current skill and labor shortages in expanding sectors and facilitate labor market integration.

In addition, employers emphasize that activation in workplaces is pointless if language skills are too low, and they urge municipalities to educate participants to meet a sufficient level before placements.

In conclusion, there are several challenges in activation practices that employers are keen for municipalities to acknowledge and adjust. Employers answered a direct question about whether MACs had encouraged employer perspectives on activation. Five IDI employers had fully positive experiences where MACs were perceived as responsive and keen to consider employer experiences. Even though few employers had been engaged in policy design or MAC cooperation, they certainly had both ideas and opinions on building a joint strategy in what we describe as a hybrid logic (see Glynn & Lounsbury 2005; Thornton et al. 2005). At the same time, many employers are more passive due to a lack of time and opportunity to voice concerns over existing programs or be a co-producer in activation. Their communication regarding possible, and in their opinion necessary, improvements in activation often stemmed from their direct experiences with dysfunctional programs or poor engagement from MACs.

Conclusion

Our results can contribute to an understanding of the various challenges and disincentives that employers experience and the impact activation may have on recruitment processes. Neither at the policy level nor in previous research have employer perspectives toward municipal activation been given substantial consideration (Ingold et al. 2023; Orton et al. 2019). The strength of this study is that 277 employers have provided an extensive empirical foundation. However, the findings of this study also have some

limitations, in that municipal activation institutions are not homogeneous entities and thus susceptible to local variations (Jacobsson et al. 2017). Therefore, we included eight municipalities to represent a sufficiently varied sample and remain cautious about generalizing our results. Also, the actors that represent the MACs are not included.

What our studies can conclude is that employer perceptions on the function of municipal activation are characterized by variation, ranging from being engaged co-producers to those blatantly dismissing the very notion of activation. In between are those indifferent or passive, mostly due to not perceiving MACs and their participants as a relevant source for recruitment. Most respondents had limited knowledge of local activation practices.

As there was a pronounced discrepancy between the activation of public policy and employers' more problem-oriented understanding, the analyses focused on these competing logics and their diverging knowledge claims. According to the employers, MAC logics often do not correspond to the demanding reality of the contemporary labor market. Employers often doubt that participants hold a prospective capacity of generating the full productivity required, thus questioning the mutual gain and overall function of activation as a channel for recruitment. Many employers reject the notion of free labor as they perceive that risks, responsibility, and potential liabilities require resources that do not outweigh potential gain. In conclusion, investing various resources and risk in low-wage labor or activation measures stands in contradiction to the employer logic.

Our study also concluded that what matters most to employers during recruitment is behavioral traits and motivated applicants. What employers primarily want is thus often the opposite of what they think activation participants are, often rendering a hesitant or dismissive approach.

By using logic in the analysis, some major challenges for activation were indicated. For policymakers, activation is a chance for unemployed persons to find employment. For this to succeed, employers need to value the competence provided through activation. Organizations are boundary-maintaining systems inclined to keep resources from leaving, and especially so for purposes not shared by those with power over the organization. Consequently, employers certainly cannot comply, when engaging in activation may lead to spending their resources on fulfilling the goals of MACs. Simultaneously, MACs seem unwilling to spend enough resources on employers acknowledging employer contributions, challenges, and terms for engagement. Some employers question the economic rationale in investing various resources and risk in low-wage labor; they do not want to spend resources on basic skills training when they can employ people who already have them. For activation to be a success, beyond its aim to discipline unemployed individuals, employers must value the policy (see Clasen et al. 2016; Herbst & Benjamin 2016). A central result from a demand-side perspective in this study is that activation with job placement training was rarely sufficient to qualify participants to become eligible candidates for subsequent employment.

The potential to improve outcomes in municipal activation would benefit from making the MAC and employer logics, and their different knowledge claims, more coherent and less competing. A possible policy implication from our study is further acknowledgment of the centrality of engaging employers as strategic co-producers, as well as in designing activation practices increasingly based on demand-side requirements of what training primarily contributes to employability. This may facilitate employer engagement and contribute to more coherent knowledge claims and expectations on



the institutionalized local activation field (Bredgaard & Halkjaer 2016; Dall et al. 2023; Orton et al. 2019).

There is 'no magic formula for engaging employers to make ALMPs work' according to Ingold and McGurk (2023, p. 231). However, based on our results, we suggest that demand-side requirements could be further and systematically included in national policy changes and at the local level implementation. The employers question the extent to which their contributions are reasonable to expect when their requirements for a partnership with municipalities that are based on accountability, transparency, and fair compensation are not acknowledged. Investing national-level resources and establishing increased quality standards, for example, meeting demand side requirements such as validating sufficient language level pre-activation, would likely also lead to improvements in employer expectations and lessen the information incongruity (Dall et al. 2023).

Even if Sweden has a tradition of corporatist labor market policy, it is perfectly voluntary for employers to take part in activation. Engaging in activation is an offer employers *can* and often *will* refuse (cf. Lødemel & Trickey 2000) when too many aggregated factors are perceived as challenging and draining. And they are, in the end, the ones that employ.

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