research provocation

Co-production in the recruitment of frontline public service employees

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This article analyses whether involving public service users in the recruitment of frontline employees (FLEs) helps to identify candidates who have the skills needed to co-produce with citizens. It investigates user involvement in FLE recruitment in three public service organisations in Sweden – from the perspectives of service managers, service developers, Human Resource Managers, union representatives and frontline employees. It finds that involving users was perceived to be beneficial for attracting and identifying applicants with a user-centred mindset. User involvement was also seen useful for establishing realistic expectations of what public services can deliver. However, a perceived challenge was to ensure equality and equity of user contributions. This included finding users who were sufficiently informed but without resorting to 'expert users'. Many users required preparation, which added to the complexity and cost of recruitment, and it was important to overcome internal resistance by involving staff in designing and trialling the process.

Introduction

The re-emergence of the co-production concept has led to far-reaching changes in public policy and management. Citizens, who were traditionally characterised as passive recipients of public services, are recognised as valuable actors to involve in the design, management, delivery and evaluation of public services (Osborne et al, 2016; Verschuere et al, 2018; Bovaird et al, 2019). In fact, increasing evidence suggests that public service users and other members of the community can make important contributions to activities that were originally seen as solely tasks for professionals (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016). For example, studies in the fields of community safety

(van Eijk, 2018), healthcare (Hardyman et al, 2015) and education (Trischler et al, 2018) show that citizens are capable and willing to apply resources (for example, in the forms of time, money, skills) to co-produce outcomes that are beneficial not only to themselves but also to the broader citizenry.

This article contributes to co-production theory and recruitment practice in the public service sector by investigating a specific instance of co-production – that is, the involvement of public service users in frontline employee (FLE) recruitment. Such an investigation is relevant because FLE recruitment constitutes a critical success factor of public service provision. Not only are FLEs central to collaboration and relationship-building with public service users (Grönroos, 2007), they are also key to activating and enabling citizens to deploy their resources for publicly desired outcomes (Nederhand and Meerkerk, 2018; van Eijk, 2018; Vanleene et al, 2019). Consequently, professionals, such as social workers, employment officers and healthcare workers, cannot be 'detached experts' but must be skilled 'street-level workers' (Lindsay et al, 2018; Brunetto and Beattie, 2020). Recruitment sets the preconditions for employing such professionals by searching for, attracting and selecting the candidate who embodies the suited competencies, characteristics and motivations.

In reflecting on the close relationship between FLEs and citizens, an interesting but so far unaddressed question that arises is whether FLE recruitment should be co-produced by involving and seeking input from public service users. Supporting this question are studies showing that public service users can contribute unique knowledge of what is needed for effective public service provision (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; Trischler et al, 2019). This user knowledge may also be highly relevant for recruitment practices, for example, for identifying and selecting a job candidate who possesses not only suitable competencies but also the relevant characteristics and motivation for public service provision. Yet recruitment has historically been an internal process, and limited insights are available on the involvement of users in this process (Baxter et al, 2017). In fact, human resource management (HRM) in general remains an under-researched topic in the public sector, which leads to the problem of HRM strategies and practices following mainstream theories (Brunetto and Beattie, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is to explore the application of co-production principles to FLE recruitment practices. To achieve this aim, we next define the FLE recruitment process and link it conceptually to co-production research. We then report on a case study of three public service organisations (that is, a social welfare office, an employment office and a state school) that trialled user involvement at various stages of the FLE recruitment process. Co-design workshops and in-depth interviews with internal stakeholders, including managers, service developers, HRM specialists, union representatives and FLEs, provided first insights into the potential benefits and challenges of opening up FLE recruitment to public service users as direct contributors. The article concludes by discussing the theoretical and practical implications of this research and by defining future research opportunities.

Literature

Recruitment and user involvement in the FLE recruitment process

Recruiting the right talent to apply for and accept jobs is the foundation of both organisational effectiveness (Phillips and Gully, 2015) and public service performance

(Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017). In general, a recruitment process can be defined as an organisation's 'collective efforts to identify, attract, and influence the job choices of competent applicants' (Ployhart, 2006: 869). Various factors can affect the applicant pool and subsequent recruitment outcome, both in numbers and quality of competent candidates (Chapman et al, 2005; Breaugh, 2013). As these factors have an overall effect on recruitment, they must be kept in mind when adding new elements to the process (for example, involving users in interviews).

One factor is timing – both in terms of when recruitment is conducted and the duration of different stages of the recruitment process (Breaugh, 2013). The former aspect refers to possible seasonal effects, while the latter refers to delays during the actual recruitment process. Delays are especially problematic in a competitive market environment because the highest-quality candidates tend to choose their employer early in the process (Boswell et al, 2003). In addition, information – in the form of providing a realistic understanding of the organisation and the vacant position – plays a vital role not only in attracting the right applicants (Breaugh, 2013), but also in strengthening employer branding (Allen et al, 2004; Acarlar and Bilgiç, 2013). The perception of an employer being competent, personable and trustworthy is important because it increases the chances of a candidate ultimately accepting the position (Chapman et al, 2005).

Although the studies discussed earlier provide relevant insights into factors affecting recruitment outcomes, they do not investigate the involvement of public service users. One reason for this is that recruitment research generally draws on an internal management perspective, where HRM plays a key role in raising awareness of job openings, influencing people to apply and maintaining interest throughout the process until a suitable candidate is selected (Breaugh, 2013; Phillips and Gully, 2015). Yet we identified two streams of literature that 'break out' from this perspective – namely, case studies in health and social care (Baxter et al, 2017) and studies on personal assistance (for example, Christensen, 2012; Glasby and Littlechild, 2016; Shakespeare et al, 2017).

The first literature stream focuses on specific scenarios, such as mental health or disability services, where one social worker is often recruited to work with one or a small group of public service users (Baxter et al, 2017). The findings show that users can help in defining applicants' required skills and competencies during the pre-recruitment stage (Hurtado et al, 2014), be part of the selection panel during the interview and selection process (Sánchez-Bahíllo et al, 2012) and contribute to the assessment of a candidate's skills (Foster et al, 2007). These practices are also common in the education sector, where student panels are appointed, for example, to attend and evaluate trial lectures delivered by potential job candidates. These studies also highlight that users need to be recruited, trained and supported before and during such involvement, which may increase the time and resources needed for FLE recruitment (Foster et al, 2007; Baxter et al, 2017). When they are prepared, however, public service users seem to make a range of contributions, thus supporting our argument for extending co-production to FLE recruitment practices.

The second literature stream concerns the personalisation of public services through direct payment. Direct payment is an increasingly popular care provision model that allows people assessed as eligible for social services to receive cash instead of services from their local authority to employ their own personal assistants (Christensen, 2012; Shakespeare et al, 2017; Glasby, 2019). Several related studies have explored the consequences of shifting the power of recruitment and employment to public

service users (Spandler, 2004; Needham and Glasby, 2014; Glasby and Littlechild, 2016; Shakespeare et al, 2017). An aspect that is unique to this context is that personal assistance is typically characterised by a close employer–employee relationship, which involves physical proximity, intimate assistance and tasks requiring trust (Shakespeare et al, 2017). This can lead to friendship and emotional attachment which, when mutual, can be beneficial for both parties, however, when imbalanced or when boundaries are overstepped, can have severe consequences, such as emotional pain, stress and mental fatigue, or abuse of power and exploitation (Spandler, 2004; Christensen, 2012). To mitigate these risks, Shakespeare et al (2017) recommend training and support for both public service users and personal assistants, with a focus on developing mutual understanding of their roles and how assistance relationships should be managed. Although the current study did not investigate a direct payment model, where recruitment of a personal assistant is outsourced to eligible public service users, insights from the literature are nonetheless relevant, especially regarding the expectations that may arise from involving users in FLE recruitment.

We next link recruitment with the co-production concept. We draw this link because co-production research focuses on investigating the involvement of users in activities that were traditionally seen as the sole responsibility of professionals. The co-production concept thus provides a suitable theoretical basis for our study to build upon and contribute to.

Linking FLE recruitment with the co-production concept

Co-production has various definitions in the public management literature (for example, Alford, 2009; Brandsen and Honingh, 2016; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016; Osborne et al, 2016). While there is consensus that the fundamental elements of co-production are the interaction, relationship and collaboration between citizens and public service professionals (for example, Brandsen and Honingh, 2016), its dimensions are less clear. For example, co-production can be seen in a narrow sense as an inherent characteristic of public service delivery (for example, Alford, 2009) or in a broader stance by also considering other contributions made by service users and professionals to achieve better public service provision (for example, Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016). This study draws on the latter conceptualisation, defined as the 'involvement of public service users in any of the design, management, delivery and/ or evaluation of public services' (Osborne et al, 2016: 640).

To make the concept more manageable for theory building and testing, recent studies have developed four dimensions of co-production: co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-assessment (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2016; Bovaird et al, 2019). Its focus on user involvement in FLE recruitment positions the present study within the dimension 'co-commission', which concerns 'public sector organizations working with communities and people who use services to identify, prioritize and finance public outcomes' (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2016: 263). While this definition does not cover HRM practices per se, Bovaird and Loeffler (2019) indicate that co-commissioning includes a range of activities all aimed at improving the arrangements for publicly desired outcomes. Co-commission as such *sets the conditions* for improved service delivery and builds on the assumption that citizens, and specifically selected expert users, can meaningfully contribute to this activity (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2016).

Table 1: Overview of participants involved in this study.

ID*	Gender	Background	Organisation	Participated in the interview
Co-Design Workshop 1 – March 2019				
Anna	female	HRM	employment office	Yes
Barbara	female	Manager	employment office	Yes
Clara	female	HRM	state school	Yes
Adam	male	Manager	state school	Yes
Daniela	female	Service developer	social welfare office	Yes
Eva	female	HRM	social welfare office	Yes
Co-Design Workshop 2 – May 2019				
Frida	female	Service developer	employment office	No
Greta	female	HRM	employment office	Yes
Ben	male	Manager	employment office	No
Hannah	female	Manager	employment office	No
Ida	female	Union/FLE	employment office	Yes
Jasmin	female	Union/FLE	employment office	No
Karin	female	Union/FLE	employment office	No
Barbara	female	Manager	employment office	No
Anna	female	HRM	employment office	No
Carl	male	Manager	social welfare office	Yes
Lucy	female	Manager	social welfare office	No
Marit	female	FLE	social welfare office	Yes
Eva	female	HRM	social welfare office	No
Nina	female	Manager	social welfare office	No
Daniela	female	Service developer	social welfare office	No
Olivia	female	Manager	state school	No
Paula	female	FLE	state school	Yes
Daniel	male	FLE	state school	No
Rachel	female	FLE	state school	No
Susan	female	Manager	state school	No
Tina	female	FLE	state school	No

Note: * The listed names represent IDs and are therefore fictitious

While the importance of user involvement in commissioning activities, such as service planning, service improvements, resource mobilisation and prioritisation or personalisation, is well documented (for example, van Eijk and Steen, 2014; Lindsay et al, 2019; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2019), its extension to recruitment practices has not been studied. This is surprising because, as we highlighted in the introduction, FLEs and their interaction and relationship with public service users form a key element of public service provision. In addition, co-production research, including studies focusing on commissioning activities, highlights numerous benefits that can result from the involvement of public service users. For example, in their comprehensive review of co-production studies, Loeffler and Bovaird (2016) find that citizens can contribute

to improved public service provision through their knowledge, resources, ideas and creativity, compliance and legitimacy. From this standpoint, it could be argued that public service users can also contribute meaningfully to recruitment practices and should specifically have a say in the recruitment of those who then work with them on a continuous basis. Conversely, however, studies on the personalisation of public services suggest that involving users in recruitment can have several (unintended) consequences for the subsequent relationship between FLEs and public service users. It is therefore important to clearly understand the potential benefits and challenges of opening up FLE recruitment to public service users. This study takes a first step towards generating such an understanding by reporting on a case where three public service organisations trialled the application of co-production principles to the recruitment of FLEs.

Method

This study employed a case study design because this method enables the in-depth investigation of a phenomenon within its real-life context by using multiple data sources (Yin, 2009). The sought insights were internal stakeholders' perceptions of a co-produced FLE recruitment process. The case study involved three public service organisations (that is, a social welfare office, an employment office and a state school) which are part of Helsingborgs stad, a medium-sized municipality in Sweden. This contextual focus is interesting because the public sector in Sweden is experiencing increasing pressure to improve its operational efficiency while simultaneously providing public services to a society that is characterised by an ageing population, an increase in chronic illnesses and a high immigration rate. Within this environment, Helsingborgs stad has taken a leading role in driving and testing new service innovations with the mission of being a municipality that collaborates closely with citizens on public service design and provision. A key element of working towards this mission is recruiting public service professionals who have a service- and user-centred mind-set, but the question is whether public service users can contribute to attracting these professionals. The three public service organisations that agreed to participate in exploring this question are briefly introduced later in the article.

Overview of the participating organisations

The social welfare office is responsible for delivering welfare-related services to citizens in Helsingborg, including issues such as maltreated children, substance abuse, cognitive disabilities and financial assistance. The organisation employs around 500 staff and is governed by a politically elected board. Within the last two years, the organisation introduced a voluntary user involvement process to their FLE recruitment. This means that recruiting managers can choose whether they want to involve service users in the process. A specialist responsible for involving users then assists in their identification, preparation and involvement. Thus far, users have been involved at different stages of the process: in developing job announcements, ranking and shortlisting candidates, during interviews and in the decision-making. The user involvement initiative was introduced to attract social workers who have a 'user-centred mind-set' and are motivated to closely collaborate with users in their everyday work.

The employment office provides three core services: adult education, financial assistance and employment support. It employs approximately 400 staff and, like the social welfare office, is governed by a politically elected board. The employment office had not previously involved users in FLE recruitment, mainly because of the short-term relationship with, and diversity of, its users. However, at the start of the study, the office was exploring an opportunity to test user involvement approaches in its recruitment process. It was, therefore, assumed that its participants would have relevant views to share on this topic.

The third case involved one of the municipality's schools, which is comparable to a state school funded by the government and is responsible for the education of approximately 900 students, from preschool to high school. The school employs a total of 130 teachers, administrative staff and managers and is governed by the educational office of Helsingborgs stad. To date, the school has trialled the involvement of student representatives in interviewing new substitute teachers. As its next step, the school management aims to empirically evaluate whether student involvement in recruitment leads to better recruitment outcomes, measured by the quality of applicants and employer branding.

Data collection, participants and data analysis

The data were collected between March and May 2019 from 11 in-depth interviews and two co-design workshops with 27 participants in total (see Table 1 for an overview). A co-design workshop uses a group-based format where people with different knowledge backgrounds employ their collective creativity to explore needs and ideate new solutions to a specific topic (Trischler et al, 2018). Co-design groups typically comprise four to six participants who are guided through several activities by one or two facilitators, with a specific emphasis on encouraging individual reflection and collaborative exploration (Trischler et al, 2018). Both co-design workshops were complemented by in-depth interviews which were conducted on the days after the respective workshop. We used in-depth interviews as a complement because they allowed participants to reflect on the group discussions during the workshop and share their individual perspectives. Furthermore, the utilisation of different data collection methods (that is, triangulation of methods) supported the cross-verification of the findings (Patton, 1999).

The first co-design workshop was hosted in March 2019 and focused on identifying different points of departure around user involvement in FLE recruitment within each

Figure 1: The recruitment process used by the municipality Helsingborgs stad.

Note: Stages during which user involvement had been previously trialled are highlighted in italics and underlined font.

Timespan: 9-14 weeks
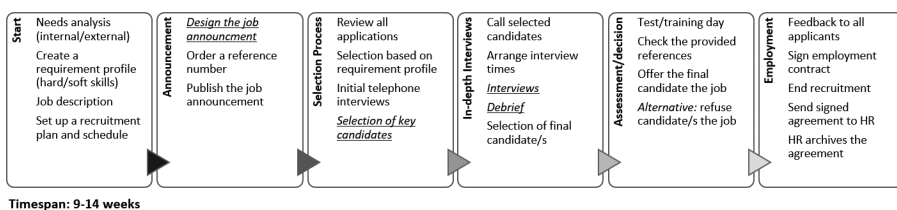
of the three participating organisations. Two representatives from each organisation, who had expressed an interest in driving the initiative, were invited to participate. During a two-hour workshop, participants were first asked to describe how user involvement has been deployed in their organisation. Then the general recruitment process used by Helsingborgs stad municipality was provided as a template (see Figure 1) and participants were asked to first individually and then collaboratively explore possible opportunities and challenges for realising user involvement at different stages of this process. The day after the workshop, in-depth interviews were conducted with all six workshop participants.

The second co-design workshop took place in May 2019. This time, a wider range of participants were invited, including managers, service developers, HRM specialists, union representatives and FLEs. These participants were chosen by asking the participants from the first co-design workshop to identify and contact staff who had experience or interest in user involvement. To allow staff members to freely discuss and share their perspectives, no users were invited. The workshop lasted for two-and-a-half hours and comprised two stages. First, participants were divided into four groups which were homogeneous in terms of their work background (for example, HRM specialists) but heterogeneous in terms of their organisational background. This way, employees working in similar positions could discuss and exchange perspectives across organisations. Within their groups, participants were guided through a set of activities including individual brainstorming, card sorting and the collaborative clustering of perceived benefits and challenges. The cards were based on insights derived from the first data collection round and were colour-coded as green for potential benefits (that is, benefits of user involvement as perceived by the recruiting organisation) and red for potential challenges (that is, challenges of realising user involvement perceived by the recruiting organisation). In addition, blank cards were provided in case the groups identified new benefits or challenges. During the second stage, the participants were re-allocated into groups according to their organisational background to discuss the insights from the card sorting activity and sketch out the future requirements for their organisation. Again, in-depth interviews were conducted after the co-design workshop. To cover perceptions across all three organisations, two representatives from each organisation were invited to participate. One participant cancelled her/his participation thus resulting in five in-depth interviews.

During both workshops, two researchers took field notes independently (for example, related to discussions or dynamics within the groups) and took photos during the card sorting activity (for example, ranking of cards, notes related to research requirements). All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed and then analysed together with the workshop material using NVivo 12. The data were analysed using a thematic analysis process (Miles and Huberman, 1994) focused on perceptions related to the potential benefits and challenges of involving users in the FLE recruitment process. The findings from the analysis are presented next.

Findings

Ranking of the perceived benefits and challenges of co-produced FLE recruitment

To provide an overview of the perceptions of different internal stakeholders regarding the involvement of users in FLE recruitment, this section begins by reporting the

Table 2: Results of the groups' card rankings on the perceived benefits and challenges.

Perceived Benefits	Illustrative Comments	Group	Rank
Users can bring important new perspectives to the recruitment process.	*Users are open-minded [and can bring perspectives on] soft values and personal fit.* (HRM)	HRM	1
		FLE	1
		Managers I/II	1
Users can give insights into their 'lifeworld' and how frontline employees can support their needs.	*It acknowledges that users are having their perspectives and complements [the process by bringing in] their perspective and review of competences.* (Managers II)	HRM	2
		FLE	3
		Managers I/ II	1
Involving users increases their self-esteem, self-efficacy, and perceived ownership of the service.	*[It makes users] feel more connected and loyal to the organisation.* (Managers I)	HRM	3
		FLE	2
		Managers I	2
		Managers II	3
User involvement in the recruitment process makes our organisation an attractive employer.	*Yes, under the assumption that we can then live up to the applicant's expectations.* (HRM)	HRM	4
		Managers I	3
		Managers II	1
Involving user during the recruitment process is the first step towards providing user-centred services.	*Involving users in recruitment is just one step. It is a tool that we should use throughout our organisation.* (Managers I)	Managers I	3
		Managers II	2
User involvement in the recruitment process needs to be well planned.	*All depends on good planning.* (FLE)	HRM	1
	Planning ensures that challenges related to resources, time and complexity are solved right from the beginning. (Managers I)	FLE	1
		Managers I/II	1
User involvement means more resources are required for recruiting employees.	*I would never have time to administer everything myself. Support is needed to keep this going.* (Managers I)	HRM	1
	Users need to be introduced. Is it managers or we at HRM or somebody else? It is a workload question. (HRM)	Managers I	1
		Managers II	3
It is difficult to identify the 'right' user to be involved in the recruitment process.	*It is difficult to get hold of variety and quantity of users.* (HRM)	HRM	4
	It is important to find the right users and [ensure] that a variety of people is involved in the process. (FLE)	FLE	2
		Managers II	2
User involvement makes the recruitment process more complex.	*It will be a challenge to manage the calendars and arrange a time so everyone has an opportunity to participate.* (HRM)	HRM	3
		FLE	3
		Managers II	4
		Managers I	2
User involvement prolongs the recruitment process.	*One problem is time. The process must not slow down recruitments too much.* (HRM)	HRM	3
	Time is always scarce. If the recruitment process, with the different selections and interviews phases, would be even more delayed, that would be problem. (Managers I)	Managers I	1
If involved in the recruitment process, users might become too close to the organisation.	*Don't [only] involve 'expert users'.* (HRM)	HRM	2
		Managers I	3

results of the card sorting activity conducted during the second co-design workshop. Table 2 depicts the ranking results, which are categorised into potential benefits and challenges. Although the four co-design groups ranked the cards independently, the results indicate an overall consensus: unique perspectives contributed by users was the highest-ranked benefit, while a well-planned process and the need for additional resources were the highest-ranked challenges. The field notes taken during the co-design workshops and data from the interviews provide deeper insights into the reasoning underpinning these ranking results. We categorise these into (a) perceived benefits of user involvement, (b) challenge of finding the right user(s), (c) justifying the increased need for resources, and (d) overcoming resistance and challenges through co-design.

Perceived benefits of user involvement

The aim of a recruitment process is to find the most suitable candidate for the advertised position. Across the organisations, participants highlighted that user involvement in the FLE recruitment process can attract and enhance the selection of suitable candidates. Related perceived benefits included attracting more candidates with a user-centred mindset, unique employer branding through the innovative process, and a more accurate candidate selection procedure owing to new perspectives brought by users. Participants described users as providing an 'outsider's view' or 'down-up perspective' to the recruitment process, including their view on what is required of an FLE working with them:

> We are quite good in taking a user perspective; we know what is good for our citizens. But we still do not understand the users' perspective: for example, their situation, needs, experiences and frustrations. So, I think they [that is, users] are important because they bring another perspective on reality. (Daniela, social welfare office)

Interestingly, while all three organisations shared similar views on the benefits, the perceived importance of involving users seemed to increase after this approach was used. For example, participants from the social welfare office (which has extensively experimented with user involvement in FLE recruitments) shared high enthusiasm about user involvement. A service developer of the social welfare office (Daniela) even said that there is 'no turning back once you have started using the method', referring to a constantly emerging culture within the office, where user involvement becomes almost an unquestioned 'way of thinking and doing' in people's everyday work. Likewise, participants representing the state school shared a positive view and saw user involvement as a 'logical step' in recruiting teachers:

> I think they [students] have a really meaningful role to play. I would not say it is valued more or less than other people involved in the recruitment group, but of course it adds a dimension. They are the people that will be stuck with your decision. They are the people in front of that teacher every day. So, to not have them involved in some way would seem not really logical, I suppose. (Adam, state school)

In contrast, participants from the employment office, which had not yet involved users in its recruitment process, were more reserved towards this approach. They highlighted the many uncertainties related to the effects of user involvement and called for a rigorous evaluation:

> Not every colleague thinks it is an appropriate method. They question the whole idea. They say, 'What? It is our responsibility as an organisation to handle the recruitment. How should users add to this process?' (Barbara, employment office)

In fact, the need for rigorous evaluation was identified as a key priority by participants across all three organisations. Participants perceived a lack of evidence that a co-produced FLE recruitment process will actually lead to better results, thus making it difficult for them to justify any significant resource investment into this initiative.

The challenge of finding the right user(s)

One challenge of realising user involvement that participants shared was 'finding representative users' or 'ensuring that the users' perspective is representative', as a service developer of the social welfare office described. Related to these questions, concerns were raised that users 'carry their own stories and background', thus bringing their individual needs and perspectives into the recruitment process. For example, service users of the social welfare and employment office can have very unique needs or backgrounds (for example, psycho-social issues, traumatic experiences or drug abuse). This led repeatedly to the question of whether 'the right users' actually get involved:

> Is it enough that they say 'I want to', or do we have to check them? If we have this Facebook group and people can say 'I want to participate', and perhaps that person has a bad day and wasn't well enough, perhaps took some drugs…I don't know. But he or she isn't in that place that you could really expect of them. So, how do we control that? Is it something we have to control or…I don't know. But I think, for myself, I would find it quite hard or not so comfortable if someone came and was affected by something and we're going to have an interview. (Eva, social welfare office)

Similarly, participants from the employment office raised the questions of whether simply including a few selected users in the process is sufficient. Participants also stressed that users need to be sufficiently experienced with the services provided by the organisations, thus leading to the challenge of getting access to a broad enough user group and ensuring that different experiences are reflected:

> I would value a representative selection, or what you say, of citizens who can articulate the different opinions that are out there. You don't want a small group who loves or hates [that is, users with extreme views]. You want the nuances of the service they experience, because the service is experienced differently, because we are humans working in social work, so there are a lot of people you can meet. They all have personalities that shine through when we respond to citizens, for good and for bad. (Anna, employment office)

The same manager additionally described that the employment office works in an environment where FLEs can receive threats (for example, FLEs receiving threats via email or phone in response to negative financial aid decisions). Thus, FLEs and the union representing them seek to retain a degree of distance and question whether this distance may become jeopardised through user involvement practices, especially when users are allowed to self-select into the process:

> The general threat level within the whole organisation has increased, which creates uncertainties among employees. […] It might be that the union calls for a risk assessment, based on the worry of employees, to evaluate the risks of [user] involvement. (Anna, employment office)

The perceived challenge of 'representation' was not as apparent at the school, where elected members of the student council were involved in the recruitment process. Yet during the co-design workshop, participants discussed whether such councils actually represent the students' different views and needs. Participants across all three organisations, thus, identified that an important requirement for realising a co-produced FLE recruitment process is testing different approaches, such as involving user panels instead of single users or using an approach that allows for obtaining feedback from a larger user group.

Justifying the increased need for resources

In all three organisations, it is the manager who initiates and takes overall responsibility for the recruitment process. Since recruitment is not a regular element of a manager's everyday work, this process often becomes an 'add-on' to an already tight schedule. Involving users in the recruitment process means adding an additional player who must not only be considered in the scheduling but who also requires preparation, guidance and assistance throughout the process. This likely leads to a recruitment process that is more complex and resource intensive. Participants from the social welfare and employment offices stressed that if users were involved, this process could not be taken on by managers alone but would require a designated person assisting in the selection, preparation and involvement of suitable users:

> I would never have time, I would say, to manage all the details myself. We need support to keep it going. [PERSON] has done a lot when it comes to recruitment: coordinating the users, getting them to meetings, analysing the ads with them and so on. I haven't done that; she did all that. So, yes, support is needed, and resources are needed, to do this. (Carl, social welfare office)

The necessity to prepare users was also highlighted by participants representing the school. However, in contrast to those from the other two organisations, they were less concerned about these additional tasks. A reason for this might be that the school has a clear process in place:

> [To select users,] I go to the student council, because they've been selected by their peers. It seems only fair and they're motivated. They [students] all get the CVs and the applications from all the candidates. Then they prepare

questions and send them to me in advance, just so I can help, so that they're not closed questions or just some tips about how to write better questions. But the questions come from them. Then I meet them maybe half an hour before the interview and I talk to them about some of the logistics, like who's asking what questions. During the interview, I help them with, I suppose, with being an interviewer… it is what I was helping with. And then after the interview, I sit down with them again and have like a feedback round. (Adam, state school)

This description clarifies that a structured process removes ambiguity and complexity. First, student involvement is limited to the interview stage, and the involved students are selected from the student council. Second, since students attend classes, their preparation and involvement can be more easily scheduled. Third, making a contribution to the school's operations beyond teaching hours is a defined element in the learning curriculum, thus justifying the time and effort invested by students. Finally, the school has a commonly accepted objective underpinning the involvement initiative – namely, 'giving students a voice in the teacher selection process' – which makes it easier for all stakeholders to play their part in achieving this objective.

Nonetheless, the organisations operate in an environment where resources are scarce and any resource investment must be clearly justified. Although participants indicated a clear commitment to exploring user involvement in FLE recruitment further, they raised concerns about challenges related to integrating this initiative in the current workloads of managers and HRM specialists. Those from the social welfare and employment offices linked increased resource requirement to various issues, such as identifying suitable users, inviting users, user preparation and coordinating user involvement in the recruitment process. Thus, participants called for structured involvement that enables the systematic involvement of selected users (for example, trained expert users) coupled with a clear understanding of how their involvement affects recruitment outcomes.

Overcoming resistance and challenges through co-design

The perceived challenges alongside the many unaddressed questions related to the actual effects of user involvement in FLE recruitment made the initiative vulnerable to resistance. Here, the second co-design workshop proved to be a valuable approach because it allowed stakeholders across the organisations to share their perspectives, collaboratively discuss and rank perceived benefits and challenges, and explore possible ideas for the future.

For example, at the employment office, FLEs and union members resisted implementation due to the feeling of a power shift to a small group of users with strong individual needs. To overcome this resistance, the office first explored options for passive user involvement approaches (for example, an online forum, feedback platform or surveys), where users are asked for input without being in direct contact with the job applicant. During the co-design workshop and subsequent meetings, a learning module was developed that is offered by the employment office to adults seeking help in writing their job applications. During this module, users can review job announcements and provide their input to make them 'co-created' job announcements. The implementation of such an initiative was justified because it was believed that this

could lead to benefits for both the underlying employer (that is, better definition of selection criteria) and the involved user (that is, gaining insights into the employer's perspective). A similar approach was adopted by the school, however, with the objective of overcoming the sole reliance on student council members and enabling students to also have a say earlier in the process. As a manager described, this allows the school to test 'whether we are actually looking for the right candidate in the first place'.

Although the social welfare office trialled user involvement at different stages of the recruitment process, its approach lacked continuity and overlooked the requirements that must be fulfilled to allow users to participate in a meaningful way. In other words, there was no procedure specifying what must be done by whom whenever a manager seeks user input for recruitment purposes. This uncertainty caused recruiting managers and users to express reservations about this approach because, while managers perceived user involvement as 'time intensive' and 'effortful', users raised concerns about often being contacted on short notice and having little time to prepare:

> We must have a plan regarding time and availability and so on. It's self-evident. […] For example, we have one engaged user who lives outside of town and has a child in lower grades in primary school. Buses or trains make it almost impossible for her to begin before 9 am. How hard can it be to take her into consideration when you plan the interviews? It's almost bewildering! They always succeed in booking an interview for 8.15 am. (Marit, social welfare office)

To resolve these issues, the social welfare office started working towards developing a structured recruitment process that systematically accounts for user participation. This included the collaborative development of a process map starting with identifying the needs of managers (initiates recruitment but is often time-poor) and public service users (provide valuable input but require time for planning and preparation). Then the key steps of a co-produced FLE recruitment process, including support processes and resources for both managers and involved users, could be identified around these needs. For managers, this included an HRM specialist and a user communication officer to help in identifying and involving suitable users. In addition, the HRM department introduced education workshops with users to generate a pool of expert users who can be readily contacted and involved without significantly prolonging the recruitment process. The process map will be field-tested and, based on the generated insights, iteratively refined to become applicable to different recruitment and user involvement scenarios (for example, ad hoc FLE recruitments and interviews or specific user groups).

Discussion and conclusion

This study explored the extension of co-production to FLE recruitment in public service organisations. A case study, including data derived from two co-design workshops and 11 in-depth interviews with internal stakeholders, provided first insights about the perceived benefits and challenges underpinning such an approach. In this concluding section, we discuss our findings and possible implications for applying the principles of co-production to recruitment practices. Since this study investigated

an under-researched topic, we also define future research requirements with a specific focus on evaluating the consequences of a co-produced recruitment approach.

Three main implications can be drawn from this study which, owing to the study's limited data, require additional investigation, either in the form of case replication or quantitative testing. First, the study provides insights into the possible benefits of a co-produced FLE recruitment process. Through their involvement public service users can contribute unique insights about what is needed from a future FLE working on the respective job. It confirms that users 'know things that many professionals do not know' (Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016: 1008). For recruitment, user insights may especially concern skills, competencies and motivations required for an FLE to activate and enable citizens to deploy their resources for co-producing publicly desired outcomes (Nederhand and Meerkerk, 2018; van Eijk, 2018; Vanleene et al, 2019). Our findings additionally suggest that communicating user involvement as part of the job advertisement can help in attracting job seekers who identify with working closely with users or who adopt a user-centred perspective. In other words, a co-produced recruitment process seems to not only help identify but also attract the most suitable FLEs, which makes it an important commissioning activity for effective public service provision.

Second, the findings show that realising a co-produced FLE recruitment process faces several challenges. One main challenge perceived by internal stakeholders concern the identification and involvement of the 'right' users. This challenge came with the question of whether a self-selection approach is suitable for ensuring the representativeness of the users' contributions or whether it leads to the involvement of users with strong individual needs that are not in line with the broader user base. Addressing this question is important for advancing co-production theory in general and co-produced recruitment practices in particular. This is because some studies argue that self-selection procedures may lead to increased control and power by dominant individuals or the 'usual suspects' who possess the required skills or whose contributions fit in with preconceived ideas, thus undermining the generalisability, equality and equity of contributions (Jakobsen and Andersen, 2013; Flinders et al, 2016). A further risk of limiting the scope of co-production to few selected 'expert users' is that they can become too close to the organisation, thus actually not differing much from professionals (Parker 2015), which can lead to knowledge redundancy (Mahr et al, 2014). Yet, others suggest that the involvement of those who know most about the service and care about its outcomes should be sought, rather than seeking 'representativeness of the general population' (Bovaird and Loeffler, 2016; Loeffler and Bovaird, 2016). The latter argument is in line with innovation research showing that a self-selection procedure typically attracts a small group of leading-edge users who are highly motivated and have the capabilities to contribute ideas that address the needs of a broader market (Poetz and Schreier, 2012; Trischler et al, 2018). Thus, there seems to be a fine line between limiting the involvement to highly engaged and trained users, and ensuring the equality and uniqueness of user contributions.

The question of how to involve users seems particularly relevant in the current context because public service users are not necessarily trained HRM professionals. In fact, a further challenge identified in this study is the requirement to prepare and support users to become meaningful contributors during their involvement. This finding is in line with research on user involvement in FLE recruitment (Baxter et al, 2017) and personalisation (for example, Christensen, 2012; Shakespeare et al,

2017). The latter stream of literature also highlights possible negative consequences of 'outsourcing' recruitment to public service users without proper training, including abuse of power, exploitation, or false expectations towards the other party. Despite these studies' focus on one-to-one relationships (that is, a public service user recruits her/his personal assistant), we suggest that their findings are nonetheless relevant. For example, similarly to Shakespeare et al (2017), our findings suggest that a co-produced recruitment process should not be implemented ad-hoc but requires a predefined structure and clear guidelines that define the users' role as part of the recruitment team, including their form of involvement, tasks, and decision-making power. These requirements further imply that user preparation and involvement practices may need to become part of the HRM work portfolio and, thus, may be considered a specialised competence or integrated standard of HRM accreditation programmes.

Third, this study illustrates how perceived challenges and related internal resistance to change can be addressed through co-design. Co-design workshops facilitate an open dialogue among participants with different backgrounds and interests (Trischler et al, 2019), which can be effective for tackling dominant logics and structures that constrain co-production (Seravalli et al, 2017). In this study, co-design was important for collaboratively exploring different ways of overcoming the identified challenges and designing test cases for evaluation. Specifically, we found that an ongoing and open design process was required to (a) align co-production requirements with the respective internal process and structure, (b) implement a user selection and involvement process that guarantees equality and equity, and c) identify the resources for a systematic integration of co-production into organisational practices. We argue that these requirements are also relevant for other organisations as well as the implementation of co-production more generally.

We conclude the article with a call for future research to investigate in greater depth the consequences of using a co-produced recruitment process in public service organisations. Public service organisations operate in an environment where resources are scarce, which means that any investments in new initiatives or policy changes must be clearly motivated. In addition, the current popularity of the co-production concept can lead to the risk of user involvement becoming a 'showcase' practice rather than an effective approach. Therefore, future studies are required to systematically investigate the effects of co-produced recruitment. For example, field experimental studies or longitudinal studies may be used to evaluate the effects on relevant recruitment outcomes, such as the attraction, identification and selection of high-quality job candidates, employer branding and employee satisfaction.

Another important research avenue is the testing of different user involvement approaches across the recruitment process. While our study may convey the impression that co-production is limited to users participating on the interviewing panel, we note that user involvement can come in different forms, such as participation via crowdsourcing platforms, co-design workshops, roleplay and feedback forums. These different approaches may be applied and evaluated at relevant stages of the recruitment process, such as the crowdsourcing of FLE profiles or the co-design of a job announcement.

Finally, future research is required to explore possible unintended consequences of a co-produced FLE recruitment process for the different stakeholders involved. Our study provides initial indications, such as the consequences of users becoming too close to the organisation, users not feeling sufficiently supported or user involvement

becoming an unquestioned internal norm. Yet more focused explorations are required to fully understand the consequences of a co-produced FLE recruitment process for the public service organisation, public service users and applicants going through this process. We hope that this article spurs future discussion and exploration into this interesting topic.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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