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# Motivation and the standardization of work

Industry revisited or a victory to professionalism?

*A paper to the IRSPM conference in Dublin, 2011*

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## **Abstract**

The standardization of work processes has become an increasingly common feature in the public administration, aiming at both efficiency and equal treatment of citizens. Combining this standardization with employee motivation is considered a challenge. This challenge is explored, based on a survey among officials at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. Results reveal that, contrary to expectations, 73 per cent of officials perceive the standardized protocols as supportive, rather than burdening. Findings indicate that standardization can function enabling, rather than coercive. Open responses are used to identify six factors that contribute to these attitudes. These factors indicate that the standardization of work actually increased professional status, by providing with legitimacy and authority, as well as a shared knowledge base. However, officials requested better opportunities to influence the continuous development of protocols. While this remained a hinder, they chose not to comply with protocols when these were considered unrealistic. Six propositions for future research are developed.

## **Key words**

Standardization, formalization, motivation, profession, professional autonomy, Taylor

# Motivation and the standardization of work: Industry revisited or a victory to professionalism?

An increasing number of standards are imposed on street-level bureaucrats, as the public administration strives to increase its efficacy and ensure equal treatment of citizens (Brunsson & Jacobsson 2000; Lipsky 2010; Lampland & Star 2009; Ivarsson Westerberg 2004). This standardization of work can be traced back to the ideas of Max Weber (the administrative bureaucracy) and to some extent also to the ideas of Frederick Taylor (Scientific Management). The latter set of ideas were developed primarily for an industrial setting, and thus it may not be found surprising that the standardization of work is accused of being dehumanizing, curbing employee motivation (Adler & Borys 1996; Timmermans & Epstein 2010; the machine bureaucracy in Mintzberg 1993). Achieving continuity and equal treatment of citizens through standardization, while maintaining employee motivation, can be understood as a major challenge to the public sector, and especially to public sector human resource management. However, there are also numerous scholars who point out the positive effects from standardization, arguing that these outweigh possible disadvantages. Standardization is raised as an important element of any bureaucracy. Adler and Borys (1996:61) explain:

*“Organizational research presents two conflicting views of the human, or attitudinal, outcomes of bureaucracy. According to the negative view, the bureaucratic form of organization stifles creativity, fosters dissatisfaction, and demotivates employees. According to the positive view, it provides needed guidance and clarifies responsibilities, thereby easing role stress and helping individuals be and feel more effective.”*

Timmermans and Epstein (2010) make a similar point and argue against this polarization. For a whole century, this debate over the standardization of work in the public sector has flourished. Our paper draws on the two traditions involved in this discussion, as mentioned in the quotation above: The skeptics and the supporters. Both emphasize the importance of the street-level bureaucrat and his or her decision-making process, but they come to different conclusions as to the value of standardization. Our paper aims to move beyond this polarization. We do so by exploring the factors that affect attitudes, suggesting how the motivational problems can be avoided, while the bureaucratic demands for control and consequence are met. An agenda for future empirical research will be suggested, drawing on five propositions from the empirical findings of this study.

Thus, this paper explores employee attitudes to standardization and attempts to identify factors that affect these attitudes. The context is the public administration. Findings indicate that standards do not need to be demotivating per default, but rather, specific circumstances pertaining to professions must be considered. This study will show that standardization can be embraced by the public official as supportive and helpful, but this requires that related demands - for example concerning the

quality of standards, possibilities to influence standards and to be non-compliant with standards, and demands concerning ethics - are met.

The paper draws on the literature on standards and the standardization (formalization) of work, primarily from organization theory. It also draws on the literature on professions. The paper starts out with a literature review, followed by a section presenting the research design, and a section presenting the case study organization – the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. Findings are depicted in the next section, a discussion then follows. Finally, there is a section with conclusions.

# 1. The standardization of work

Bowker and Star (1999) define the standardization of work as a process of constructing uniformities across time and space, through the generation of agreed-upon rules. These standards are usually backed up by external bodies of some sort, such as professional organizations, manufacturers' associations, or the state (Timmermans & Epstein 2010). With the standardization of work, we intend the formalization and streamlining (making uniform) of work process. The aim of this standardization is usually to make operations more predictable and professionals' decision-making process easier to govern. With standardization, the room for professionals to exercise discretionary judgment decreases to some extent. Two concepts that are closely related to standardization are formalization and routinization of work. These can often be understood as synonymous with standardization, but a couple of differences are worth pointing out. First, formalization means the extent that rules and procedures are written down. Although this does not explicitly mean streamlining work processes, this will often be a necessary prerequisite in order to be able to write down procedures in a coherent fashion. The routinization of work is the degree to which space for discretionary judgment has been removed from the work process. This requires streamlining, but not necessarily formalization. Often some degree of routinization is associated with standardization. As Timmerman and Epstein (2010:xx) explain, standardization "connotes a dull sameness, the suppression of individuality in the service of industrial uniformity". Bearing these differences between the three concepts of standardization, formalization and routinization in mind, we will use the three concepts synonymously in the remainder of this paper.

Standardization (or formalization) of work is a central feature of Weber's bureaucratic ideal type and an extensively researched dimension of organizational structure (Pugh and Hickson, 1976; Mintzberg, 1979). Adler and Borys (1996) describe how research on formalization has resulted in conflicting findings and argue that this may be explained by a reluctance to see the range of different types of formalization that are studied. They differentiate between two generic types of formalization: Formalization designed to enable employees to master their tasks, and formalization designed to coerce effort and compliance from employees. The attitudinal outcomes are likely very different, Adler and Borys (1996) confirm.

Standardization is generally coupled with some level of autonomy removal for professionals. Introducing standards is a way of embedding authority in rules and systems rather than in credentialed professionals (Brunsson & Jacobsson 2000). Freidson (2001) has suggested professionalism as an ideal-typical logic, contrasting it to both the free labor market and the ideals of Weber's rational-legal bureaucracy. Freidson (2001:127) argue that the simultaneous presence of the following five interdependent elements constitute the ideal-type of professionalism.

- Specialized work, founded on theoretical, discretionary knowledge and skills, with high status in society.
- Exclusive jurisdiction, created by and controlled through occupational negotiation, in part of the labor market.
- A sheltered position on the labor market.

- A formal training program outside the labor market, associated with higher education.
- Norms that asserts greater commitment to conducting high quality work, than to economic profit or efficiency.

Autonomous judgment is a key element of professionalism, as is theoretic knowledge and a shared body of knowledge or skills. Agevall and Jonnergård (2007) suggests that there are three essential elements for professional practice: The ability to *recognize* the situation at hand, to *evaluate* the work needed, and to feel *emotionally involved* in solving the problems at hand. The latter element contains an ethical dimension, meaning that the professional will wish to perform “good” actions. This dimension may be especially important to public sector officials. Studies (xxx) indicate that public sector employees value non-intrinsic rewards higher than private sector employees.

## 2. Research Design

The research design in this study is described in two sections. First, the two research questions are presented, and a proposition for the first of these questions is developed. Second, the case study is introduced and the survey design is described, as well as response rates.

### 2.1 Research questions

This paper draws primarily on the distinction by Adler and Borys (1996), between attitudes to standardization (formalization) in terms of enabling or coercive.

The following two research questions (RQ) have been formulated.

*RQ1. Do employees perceive standardization as enabling or coercive?*

*RQ2. How can these attitudes be explained?*

In order to explore RQ1, and based on the literature review in the previous section, a proposition is developed:

*Proposition no. 1 (P1). The more standardized work, the more burdening it is perceived, among officials in the public administration.*

A survey is conducted in order to respond to RQ1 and RQ2. By testing P1, we aim to respond to RQ1. In order to explore RQ2, an explorative research approach is adopted. In the survey, respondents are asked to motivate their attitudes. These open responses are analyzed in order to respond to RQ2, but other case study material (documents and interviews) is also consulted to some extent.

### 2.2 Case study and employee attitude survey

This study is part of a research program focused on the reformation of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SIA). The case study stretches over the period 2008-2011. Within the framework of this program, more than 100 interviews have been conducted and transcribed. This has given the researchers in the program a deep understanding of the organization and the issues that it struggles with. The specific study presented in this paper draws upon the material from the case study, and it is within this framework that the employee attitude survey has been conducted. The SIA fits the purpose of this study very well, since a key feature of its reform work during the past five years has been the introduction of standardized protocols for the officials' management of arends. The SIA is one of the largest agencies in Sweden, with circa 12 000 employees. It handles allowances to citizens for parental leave, sickness absence, etc. The agency is at the very centre of the social welfare system

and hence it is also exposed to considerable interest from politicians, the media and citizens. The introduction of standardized work processes at the SIA, has been accompanied with the introduction of a system for time-measuring of these work process. The standardization and time-measuring of work has been seen as connected to each other, and occasionally, the new routine has been compared to Scientific Management and an industrial context. The past years have all in all been very turbulent at the SIA, as we shall explain in the next section, and there has been extensive resistance from many groups. In interviews, we noted that it was difficult to distinguish attitudes to time-measuring from attitudes to standardization. We had some indication that employees actually welcomed the standardized protocols, but rejected time-measuring. Distinguishing between these attitudes is important, and it was one of three key challenges that were identified when planning the research design in this study. We chose to solve this by formulating two separate questions in the survey – the first of which was focused only on time-measuring and the second focused only on standardization. See issue no. 1 in Table 1.

Another important challenge was to have a good response rate, since we were informed that officials at the SIA had been subjected to numerous surveys and currently there was almost a fatigue in this regard. The solution was to make the survey extremely short, with only three research questions and one question with background data. Furthermore, we asked for each unit manager (there were 10 managers at each department) to distribute and collect the survey at personnel meetings. The two department managers very helpful passing this wish on to the managers. Respondents were given full anonymity. If anyone wanted to submit their survey response without the help of their department manager, then this was also possible and instructions were provided in the survey information. See issue no. 2 in Table 1.

*Table 1. Three key challenges to handle in the research design.*

	<b>Challenge</b>	<b>Solution</b>
<b>1.</b>	Challenge to separate attitudes to time-measuring from attitudes to the standardization of work.	Separate questions, starting with one on time-measuring.
<b>2.</b>	Challenge to have a good response rate. Fatigue as to completing surveys among officials at the SIA.	A minor survey with only 3 research questions + background data. Distribution on a mandatory meeting, with the help of the unit manager, who then posted responses. Anonymity was guaranteed and the employee could choose to submit their survey response themselves per post.
<b>3.</b>	Challenge to explain the meaning of coercive and enabling, especially since many officials only had a Compulsory school background.	The similar concepts burdening and supportive where adopted instead in the survey.



A third challenge concerned how the concepts of coercive and enabling should be operationalized, so that respondents could understand them. We chose to replace coercive with *burdening* and enabling with *supportive*. Burdening and supportive are opposites that should feel comfortable and easy to relate to, for most employees. Not choosing a very complicated wording was especially important given that many employees only had a compulsory school background. See issue no. 3 in Table 1.

The survey was distributed at the Malmö office at the SIA. This is one of the absolutely largest of the agency’s offices, and it covers most types of arends. There are two main departments: A local service center called LFC (in Swedish Lokalt FörsäkringsCenter) and a national service center called NFC (in Swedish Nationellt FörsäkringsCenter). Arends that required a more complex decision-making process, and often also contact with the individual citizen, were handled at the LFC. Typically, sickness insurance arends were handled here. Arends that were considered more straight-forward, such as applications for parental benefits and child benefits, were handled at the NFC. A few units had not implemented standardized protocols yet and these were excluded in the survey.

In total, the survey was distributed to 261 employees. Employees on temporary leave were not included. At LFC, 111 officials received the survey. At NFC, 150 officials received the survey. It was not distributed to managers. In total, we had 247 responses – 101 from LFC and 146 from NFC. This gives us a response rate of 95 per cent (91 per cent at LFC, 97 per cent at NFC).

<p>1. In connection to the ENSA processes, the SIA has introduced time-measuring of work processes. Do you experience this time-measuring primarily as a (positive) support or a (negative) burden in your work? Please motivate.</p> <p>Supportive <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Burdening <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Please motivate. _____</p>
<p>2. Through the ENSA processes, the SIA has standardized the processing of many types of arends. Do you experience that these ENSA processes primarily function as a (positive) support or a (negative) burden in your work? Please motivate.</p> <p>Supportive <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Burdening <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Please motivate. _____</p>
<p>3. Do you experience that your work has become more or less qualified (intellectually challenging), with the ENSA processes? Please motivate.</p> <p>More qualified <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>The same <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Less qualified <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Please motivate. _____</p>

Figure 1. The three research questions in the survey. There was also a fourth question asking for background data (age etc).

The survey consisted of the following three questions, plus a fourth question with background data. In order to respond to RQ1, only question no. 2 is required. The other questions were added for future research. Question 1-3 can be found in Figure 1. Question no. 2 was formulated as follows.

*“Through the ENSA processes, the SIA has standardized the processing of many types of arends. Do you experience that these ENSA processes primarily function as a (positive) support or a (negative) burden in your work? Please motivate.”*

Before have a look at findings, we shall have a look at the background for the reforms at the SIA. Until January 2005, the social insurance offices around Sweden acted as semi-independent institutions under the federal Government. Despite funding from the Government, these agencies could organize their work as they pleased and each hence developed its own praxis for policy implementation. There was a governmental agency, called the National Insurance Agency (in Swedish Riksförsäkringsverket), which provided with recommendations and gathered statistical data to pass on to the federal government. However, the insurance offices could choose not to comply with these recommendations. Often, local politicians were positioned in the boards of these agencies, and this contributed to a development where the social insurance increasingly came to replace the unemployment insurance, with soaring numbers of costly early retirements as a result.

When the 21 local public insurance agencies were merged with the National Insurance Agency and placed under the Government, in January 2005, this had been preceded by an intense political debate. The reform had several aims. It aimed to make the public social insurance administration more efficient. It aimed to facilitate governance, especially in terms of policy implementation in the sickness insurance. It aimed to ensure equal treatment of citizens across the country. It was especially the last aim that resulted in the standardization of work at the agency – a wish to ensure that officials handled similar cases in the same (or at least a similar) way. At the agency, managers as well as officials considered this as an important and legitimate goal. The standardized protocols at the SIA were called “ENSA processes”. The Swedish word ensa means “making uniform”.

With this background, let us move into findings.

# 3. Findings

Findings are focused primarily on responses to question no. 2 in the survey. In the first section, we report the statistical results (RQ1), and in the second section we report open responses (RQ2).

## 3.1 Statistics

Bivariate analyses have been conducted with SPSS software. This statistical analysis reveals that on average 33.5 percent of officials found time measuring supportive, and 66.5 percent found it burdering. Only 3.2 percent of responses were missing (8 responses). Somewhat more respondents at LFC found time measuring supportive, and somewhat fewer found it burdening, but these differences were low. See Table 2.

Table 2. Attitudes to time measuring at the two SIA departments (NFC, LFC).

Attitude to time measuring * SIA department Crosstabulation					
			SIA department		
			NFC	LFC	Total
Attitude to time measuring	Supportive	Count	44	36	80
		% within SIA department	31,0%	37,1%	33,5%
	Burdening	Count	98	61	159
		% within SIA department	69,0%	62,9%	66,5%
Total	Count	142	97	239	
	% within SIA department	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	

To continue, on average 73.4 percent of officials found the standardized protocols supportive, and 26.6 percent found it burdering. Three responses, or 1.2 percent of responses, were missing. Differences between LFC and NFC were again low, but somewhat more respondents at LFC found standardization supportive, and somewhat fewer found it burdening. See Table 2.

Table 3. Attitudes to the standardization of work at the two SIA departments (NFC, LFC).

**Attitude to standardization of work \* SIA department Crosstabulation**

			SIA department		
			NFC	LFC	Total
Attitude to standardization of work	Supportive	Count	103	76	179
		% within SIA department	71,0%	76,8%	73,4%
	Burdening	Count	42	23	65
		% within SIA department	29,0%	23,2%	26,6%
Total	Count	145	99	244	
	% within SIA department	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	

On average 9.1 percent of officials experienced that the qualifications required for their job had increased. A total of 67.5 percent experienced that the required qualifications remained the same, and 23.5 percent experienced that these had been reduced. A total of 4 responses (1.6 percent) were missing. The differences between LFC and NFC remained low, but somewhat more officials at LFC experienced that their jobs had become less qualified than before. See Table 3.

Table 4. Attitudes to the required qualifications at the two SIA departments (NFC, LFC).

**Perception of required qualifications \* SIA department Crosstabulation**

			SIA department		
			NFC	LFC	Total
Perception of required qualifications	More qualified	Count	14	8	22
		% within SIA department	9,8%	8,0%	9,1%
	Same as before	Count	97	67	164
		% within SIA department	67,8%	67,0%	67,5%
	Less qualified	Count	32	25	57
		% within SIA department	22,4%	25,0%	23,5%
Total	Count	143	100	243	
	% within SIA department	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	

Finally, we shall have a look at how the data differs, when the independent variables of education and age are introduced.

When the impact of education on attitudes is analyzed, a surprising pattern appears, since there is no linear correlation between the three educational groups. Rather, the group with a medium level of education is the most supportive to both time-measuring and standardization. The group with the lowest level of education is the one who finds both time-measuring and standardization the most burdening. The group with experience from studies at university positions itself in the middle, in terms of these attitudes. However, this group is the one where the most respondents have stated

that their work has become less qualified than before (32.5 percent, compared to 14.3 percent of those with Comprehensive school and 12.8 percent of those with a degree from Secondary school).

The impact of age on attitudes to time-measuring is not linear either. While 46.2 percent of respondents in the group aged 20-35 perceive time-measuring as supportive, the corresponding number for the next three age groups (36-45 years, 46-55 years, 56—years) are 22.2 percent, 27.2 percent, and 38.8 percent. However, this pattern is consistent when looking at attitudes to standardization, where again the most junior group is distinguished by the most supportive attitude (82.1 percent), followed by the most senior of the four groups (with 75.6 percent supportive). On the other hand, there is a linear correlation in the third question, among those perceiving work as less qualified than before standardization. The younger respondent, the more likely that he or she considers work as less qualified than before. Responses range from an average of 32.4 percent in the most junior group, to 17.9 percent in the most senior group. Only a few (total 8.8 percent) consider work as more qualified after standardization, and it is difficult to find a pattern in this group.

### 3.1 Open responses

Respondents stating that standardized protocols primarily had a supportive function to them, often explained it by referring to them as a useful “handbook” (e. g. LFC no. 84). Some explained that it compliance with protocols was not 100 per cent. An official stated that his or her work was as qualified as before (survey question no. 3), and explained:

*“Since you can choose not to comply with the ENSA process, if you find a need for this. It is tough having to explain to your manager afterwards, but this may be necessary in order to conduct a good work.” (LFC no. 03)*

Another official made a similar point, while stating that standardization was primarily supportive;

*“The ENSA should be used as a support, you should not comply with it if the matter calls for another approach.” (LFC no. 66)*

Many officials stated that time-measuring caused stress and that it was not based on realistic calculations. There were also complaints concerning the quality of standardized protocols (e.g. LFC no. 54).

Some officials complained, while stating that their work had become less qualified, that there was less room “for your own thinking” today (e.g. LFC no. 17, 39, 44). They also complained that they could not influence how protocols were formulated, despite sometimes rather obvious problems. An official stated that standardization was primarily supportive, but added:

*“But there is no room for your own suggestions or ideas on how work can be improved or facilitated.” (NFC no. 20)*

Several respondents had ethical considerations. One official explained:

*"The ENSA processes have a tendency to transform a human insurance into a property insurance. Individuals and cars should NOT be managed in the same way." (LFC no. 21)*

Several other officials made similar statements, comparing standardization to an industrial setting (e.g. LFC no. 39, LFC no. 8). A couple of officials argued that time-measuring indicated that time was more important than quality (e.g. LFC no. 84).

An official (NFC no. 19) explained that standardization reduced uncertainty, making him or her feel more secure.

## 4. Discussion

Research question no. 1 was: Do employees perceive standardization as supportive or burdening? We suggested the following proposition and decided to test it.

*P1. The more standardized work, the more burdening it is perceived, among officials in the public administration.*

Survey results indicate that P1 is false. Rather, standardization was seen as very supportive (by 73.4 per cent of respondents). However, P1 can still be correct in other contexts, so we will settle with establishing that this may be the case, but it must not necessarily be so. “Possibly, but not necessarily.” This was interesting, because findings were opposite to what we had expected. This also makes the open responses even more interesting.

The open responses relate to research question no. 2: How can these attitudes be explained? Other interview material and document are also used to respond to this question. We have analyzed the themes of officials’ motivations, while also adding other motivations that have come up within the scope of the longitudinal case study. Our analysis indicates that these can be divided into the following six categories:

1. Influence in the continuous development of protocols
2. The quality of protocols
3. The compliance with protocols
4. Room for the discretionary judgment of professionals
5. Authority in relation to the client
6. Fairness of protocols

The first category, “influence in the continuous development of protocols”, referred to the problems for officials to get in touch with the central division assigned to develop these protocols. They were requested to channel requests to this division through a specialist or through their unit manager, but officials experienced that this did not work very well (interview no. xx). This caused frustration, especially since some protocols were considered very unrealistic and of low quality (category no. 2). The reluctance of the agency to sanction non-compliance with protocols was generally regarded as positive. This meant that officials chose to ignore protocols when they were not considered to function very well, rather than entering the lengthy road of contacting the central division in order to have protocols changed. For the SIA, a better solution would have been to delegate ownership over the various protocols to the departments or units working with the concerned type of arend. Not only would this increase motivation and self-confidence among professionals, but it would also most likely result in a higher degree of compliance.

With some room (autonomy) remaining for professionals to exert their discretionary judgment, officials also became more supportive to protocols – but on the other hand, there were also responses where officials argued that protocols were too vague on the matters where they really

needed guidance. Is there an optimum amount of space for this judgment? This is a question for future research.

An important factor was the authority that standardization provided officials in relation to clients. By referring to the protocols, officials could make non-popular decisions, without having to enter a long discussion on whether this was correct or not, and without being insecure of whether this was the right decision or not. Professionalism requires that the professional and his or her work is considered legitimate by society/the clients (Agevall & Jonnergård 2007). The fairness of protocols was a matter that was raised in particular after the political reforms in the sickness insurance area implemented in the years 2008-2009. These resulted in a rage of protests from both officials at the SIA and from citizens, against the federal Government, since it sometimes lead to very sick people being referred to the unemployment insurance, instead of being covered by the sickness insurance. A quote from the SIA internet (2009) illustrated this attitude very well;

*“HELP! Unfortunately, I work at the Social Insurance Agency and I am in agony every day. I daily meet crying and desperate people, who are very ill. Unfortunately, I have to obey unreasonable directives and orders from my managers. I am told to look carefully for flaws and unclarities in, for example, physicians’ reports, so that I can deny them sickness allowance. We are ordered to say NO in almost every occasion. We shall not make any considerations. The agency’s managers know that few people have the energy to appeal to the court of law. We practically don’t give a damn what people’s lives become like. We have our production goals to reach and to lower the number of people on sickness allowance. Nothing else matters. [...]”*

The six factors identified in this study indicate that the standardization of work that was conducted at the case study agency, not only increased employee motivation, but also increased professionalism and thus strengthened their profession. Let us return to the five elements suggested by Freidson (2001), in his ideal-type professionalism.

1. Specialized work, founded on theoretical, discretionary knowledge and skills, with high status in society.
2. Exclusive jurisdiction, created by and controlled through occupational negotiation, in part of the labor market.
3. A sheltered position on the labor market.
4. A formal training program outside the labor market, associated with higher education.
5. Norms that asserts greater commitment to conducting high quality work, than to economic profit or efficiency.

Although room for discretionary judgment (element no. 1) decreased at the agency, the theoretical level of knowledge behind protocols appeared to be high. The status of the occupation (sometimes referred to as social insurance officer in the literature) may have increased, as officials state that they feel more secure when meeting clients, and that their authority has increased, as they had formal protocols to rely on in their decisions. The exclusive jurisdiction (element no. 2) was limited to specialists, while professionals in general only were scarcely invited into the process of revising standardized protocols. The officials at the SIA did not enjoy a very sheltered position (element no. 3) on the labor market, but since a university degree increasingly was demanded (element no. 4), they were approaching such a position. Officials at the SIA clearly complied with the norms in Freidson’s



fifth condition, requesting more focus on the quality of their work, rather than the efficiency (with time-measuring as a key mechanism).

Standardization is generally coupled with some level of autonomy removal for professionals. Introducing standards is a way of embedding authority in rules and systems rather than in credentialed professionals (Brunsson & Jacobsson 2000). Freidson (2001) has suggested professionalism as an ideal-typical logic, contrasting it to both the free labor market and the ideals of Weber's rational-legal bureaucracy. Freidson (2001:127) argue that the simultaneous presence of the following five interdependent elements constitute the ideal-type of professionalism.

Officials were able to *recognize* the situation at hand, to *evaluate* the work needed, and to feel *emotionally involved* in solving the problems at hand – the three conditions suggested by Agevall and Jonnergård (2007). However, this was because they had the opportunity to choose not to comply with the standards. This possibility appears to play a central role. An official explained that this, “of course”, needed to be approved by the unit manager, but that yet, this was an important option, when the standard procedure could not be applied for some reason. This opportunity may also be important in the sense that they preserved the officials' sense of responsibility for their actions. A problem with standardization (or managing by documents) is otherwise that it may lead to a decreased sense of individual responsibility for the professional's own work, Agevall and Jonnergård (2007) explain.

Based on the findings in this study, we suggest six new propositions to be further explored in future research.

*P1. The more employees are involved in the continuous improvement of standardized protocols, the more supportive standardization will be perceived.*

*P2. The more high-quality and realistic employees consider protocols, the more supportive standardization will be perceived.*

*P3. The more protocols are used as support, without management demanding full compliance, the more supportive standardization will be perceived.*

*P4. With some room for professional discretion remaining, employee attitudes will be more supportive than with no such room.*

*P5. The more protocols can be used by employees to provide legitimacy for their decisions, the more supportive standardization will be perceived.*

*P6. The more standardized protocols are considered fair, the more supportive standardization will be perceived.*

## 5. Conclusions

This study indicates that most officials at the Swedish Social insurance Agency (SIA) see standardization as enabling, rather than coercive. However, attitudes to time-measuring compensate for this positive effect, by being perceived as highly burdening (but yet, circa 30 per cent of respondents found time-measuring supportive and this rather high number is also somewhat surprising). We aimed to identify factors that affected employee attitudes to standardization of work. Six such factors have been identified and transformed into propositions for continued research.

Especially, it is interesting to note that the standardization of work appears to have strengthened the profession of officials at the agency. It has contributed not only with a shared knowledge base, but also with authority and legitimacy in relation both to managers and perhaps especially to the client (the citizen applying for an allowance).

However, it can be noted that several officials complained over the difficulties in influencing the standardized protocols, with the centralized organization design that the agency has today. Another approach would have been to invite employees to participate in the design and continuous improvements of these protocols. The difficulties influencing protocols do not only cause frustration and a sense of alienation, but it also leads to non-compliance with protocols that are considered unrealistic. Another solution is to continue allowing room for officials to divert from protocols, when this is considered necessary.

In this paper, we have attempted to move beyond the two stereotypical views on bureaucracy and especially standardization of work, and instead focus on what factors actually affect employee attitudes to standardization. This is something that also Timmermans and Epstein (2010:69) call for:

*“Rather than associating standardization with totalizing narratives of globalization or dehumanization, we call for careful empirical analysis of the specific and unintended consequences of different sorts of standards operating in distinct social domains.”*

We hope that this research can continue, and that it may allow us to enjoy the benefits that may spring from standardization (for example predictability, equality of treatment, quality), while avoiding the risks (for example demotivating effects).

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