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Published in:
Dilemmas 2015

2017

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Westrup, U., & Persson, J. E. (2017). Human Services and the Concept of Efficiency. In S. Finken, C. Mörtberg, & A. Mirijamdotter (Eds.), *Dilemmas 2015 : Papers from the 18th Annual International Conference Dilemmas for Human Services: Organizing, Designing and Managing* (pp. 1-9)

Total number of authors:
2

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Human Services and the Concept of Efficiency

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Abstract

This paper investigates the significance of the concept of efficiency in human service organisations. Our aim is to discuss how efficiency can be assessed in this kind of organisation. Many typical human service organisations chiefly exist within the public sector's area of responsibility. Efforts aimed at, for instance, children who are faring badly, young people who are going astray, people who are sick, or people who are in need of care have obvious moral implications regarding how we use the available resources. Thus, the characteristics distinguishing such operations, and the demands that these characteristics place on the application of the concept of efficiency, are especially clear. The focus in this paper is on activities aimed at children and young people.

Key words: efficiency, human service organisations, Value Creation, Coordinate Multi-professional relationships.

Efficiency in practice

Efficiency, in the sense of housekeeping with limited resources, is important in all organisations, so too within human service organisations. In operations such as social services, healthcare and education, it is a matter of getting the most and the best out of the resources available (in the form of man-hours, premises, and equipment) on behalf of the clients, patients, and pupils. In such a principle-based sense, the concept of efficiency is relatively unproblematic. On the other hand, when it comes to practical application, things are different. The issue of how to work, manage, and lead in human service organisations, in order to be efficient, is actually deeply problematic, not least as a consequence of the prevailing trend of “importing” ready-to-use models from industry as regards how to be more efficient. The industrial perspective on efficiency is, so to speak, thrown in, causing, in most cases, more problems than it solves.

In this paper, we investigate the significance of the concept of efficiency in human service organisations. Our empirical supportive data has been taken from 6 different R&D projects, focusing on children and young people, which we have implemented at municipalities and county councils in Sweden over the past ten years. The different projects vary in nature, but they all deal with how to use resources more effectively when working with vulnerable children and adolescents. The aim of our studies has been twofold; to capture co-workers’ and managers’ experiences and perceptions regarding how the work of helping children and adolescents can be organised effectively and to then put this into practice. These projects generate knowledge which we, as researchers, can use to create and expand general theories of effectiveness. This dialogue between practitioners and researchers forms the core of our method. A systematic dialogue like this between researchers and practitioners, aimed at creating shared knowledge that contributes towards development, belongs to what is known as an interactive research approach (Johannisson, Gunnarsson and Sternberg, 2008; Svensson, Ellström and Brulin, 2007).

Today, there is great pressure on the majority of human service organisations to be able to show high efficiency by means of accounting for how and which resources and working methods are being used, and which results are being achieved (see, for example, Socialstyrelsen, 2014a, 2014b). Within the framework of this work, different models for improving efficiency have been obtained (see, for instance, Røvik, 2008), e.g. total quality management (TQM) and the balanced scorecard (BSC) and, during recent years, models like lean production or lean management. These models have their origin in manufacturing industry (among others, the automotive industry). These models are based on value as something that is created by the organisation itself in the form of goods and services which are distributed to customers. Being efficient, according to this approach, entails



producing things in the right way with the smallest possible resource consumption (internal efficiency), and making the right things, i.e. products that are in demand (external efficiency). This division is based on internal efficiency only being one relationship between output (products) and input (resources) and on the customer being a passive recipient of what is being produced. The higher the number of products being produced per unit of time, using a given resource (e.g. working hours), the greater the efficiency. Increasing internal efficiency is thus largely about measuring throughput times and trying to shorten lead times. The thing that ends up in focus, quite simply, is *time*.

When the managements of human service organisations attempt to rationalise their activities on the basis of this industrial view of efficiency, there is a major risk that throughput times and lead times will also take centre stage. People making themselves “shipshape” as quickly as possible becomes important, on the basis of the motto that “if we’re thrifty with time, then our resource utilization will also be efficient” (cf. Eriksen, 1998; Gustafsson, 1994). It can be envisaged that there are several consequences of this, e.g. pressure is brought to bear on school psychologists and social welfare officers to quickly close their cases, or that those in need of help must quickly be removed from treatment during critical life situations. In actual fact, it is easy to find examples of the consequences of the industrial view of efficiency that most people would intuitively perceive to be absurd. At preschools, staff should play more quickly with their children in order to be efficient, teachers should run through the four rules of arithmetic more quickly, school psychologists should talk more quickly with their pupils and so on. Thus, efficiency would not seem to be entirely self-evidently about speed, at least when people are working with other people in human services. On the contrary, we know that the work of helping other people to develop and change their life situations takes time if it is to result in something sustainable and lasting.

In actual fact, the industrial approach is based on entirely different prerequisites than those which apply to service activities. This is at its clearest in human services, where individuals, people, are to be developed and/or have their life situation changed – and are thus not a product to be manufactured. In a general sense, we can say that human services are actions carried out between people – human interaction (see, for instance, Austin, 2002; Petersson, Leppänen, Jönsson and Tranquist, 2006). When we work on people, the individual (pupil, client, or patient) actively takes part in one way or another (Hasenfeld, 1992). This applies to everything from lessons at school to conversations with social welfare officers, or when a doctor conducts an examination. The individual is a part of both the process and its final result, and is thus involved in creating the values, both for him-/herself and for others, which are the result of this work. The industrial measures of internal efficiency (or productivity), normally expressed as an arithmetical ratio between output and input, are thus not applicable since, of course, the individual is involved as both the numerator and the denominator.



It is thus doubtful, to say the very least, whether efficiency models developed for industrial operations are suited to housekeeping the limited resources of human service organisations, which in reality have a more complex structure than the models are capable of capturing. Despite this, it is not unusual for these models to be imported as ready-to-use solutions regarding how to improve efficiency, almost as though the activity was to do with physical products. Thus, the industrial view of efficiency and its associated basic concepts (production process, factory layout, materials flow etc), albeit using other terms (service production, service maps, customer flows etc), have made their entry into human service organisations without facing any great level of resistance (see, for example, Modig and Åhlström, 2011; Brandt, 2013).

However, and not entirely surprisingly, it has turned out to be the case that the success of these models has been a long time coming. For example, the extensive work of using TQM and the BSC to enhance the efficiency of Sweden's schools has not produced any appreciable level of success. Neither have attempts to implement lean management in healthcare rationalisation efforts provided any palpably positive results in care work (see, for example, Dagens Samhälle, 2013). The reasons for the failure of the efficiency models are connected with a lack of knowledge as to how the concept of efficiency needs to be understood in order to bring about efficient resource utilization. The lack of more in-depth comprehension and descriptions of the significance of the concept of efficiency in human services makes it difficult to formulate demands regarding how an efficient effort is to be formulated (cf. Alvesson and Sveningsson, 2012). More often than not, this leads to the concept more readily becoming an obstacle to efficient resource utilization because, in the dominant interpretation, it is not based on the characteristics of the value creation distinguishing human services. Thus, in our opinion, it is important to emphasise these characteristics in order to increase knowledge of the significance of the concept of efficiency. Such increased knowledge can guide the design of management systems that provide the prerequisites for efficient resource utilization in human services.

Value creation in human services

People's development and change is incumbent upon themselves and their own actions; it is not something that those around them must, or can, satisfy. This is reserved for the individual concerned since he/she will generate his/her own value by interacting with others (Klefbeck and Ogden, 1995; Lindstein, 1997). Thus, it is not social welfare officers, preschool teachers, recreation assistants, teachers, or any other involved professions that can either create or deliver development to children and young people. On the other hand, on the part of the staff, the ability is required to act on the basis of an attitude which has as its foundation to help and support the individual in his/her own generation of value.



This work is about helping people, to various degrees, to develop and change both themselves and their living conditions. The individual is to be transformed by means of what is done – something is to happen with the individual (Hasenfeld, 1983). Human services, where developing and changing people is the main focus, thus entail something considerably more enduring – i.e. the abilities and attitudes that individuals gradually develop they will then carry with them – than is the case for service activities in general. It is the state of the individual that represents the value of activities such as these. Thus, this is not simply a matter of a service process in the usual sense, but rather of individual-assisting service processes.

The work of helping children and young people mainly consists of interaction, i.e. human encounters. It is during the encounter that the opportunity exists to assist individuals with their own development and with changing both themselves and their living conditions. Working with children and young people, as we have tried to show above, places special demands on co-workers' possibilities of making encounters with the individuals with whom they are working good. Work is not composed of given and safe procedures regarding which knowledge, skills, or methodologies are to be applied; instead, efforts are determined on an ongoing basis using feedback from the individual. There are no given one-to-one relationships between approaches and results. During the value-creating process, the connections between output and input are thus far from given.

Efficiency in human services

In human services, work is individual and situation-dependent. During the process, children and parents interact with each other as well as with professional co-workers who have various professional skills. For example, the level of success of a pupil in need of special support is determined by how the interaction between the pupil and the school staff (e.g. social educationists, school psychologists, special needs teachers, and school nurses) works during the course of the process. This interactive interplay between children and school staff is going on simultaneous to the same children interacting with other professions from other organisations (e.g. social welfare officers, recreation leaders, and children's and adolescent psychiatrists). These professions are a part of the child's social context or, expressed differently, the child's *social space* of relationships with other people. Some of these relationships are with professional co-workers belonging to different organisations.

Different professions thus come into contact, both daily and over time, with the same children and young people through their work. How this work functions as a whole, or does not function, when it comes to supporting children, is thus dependent on whether and how resources are coordinated in order for the efforts of different organisations to be coordinated. Without knowledge of the efforts currently being made, and those which have been made, by other professions in other organisations, it is difficult to design one's own efforts in a way that sup-



ports the pupil's development and change. This relationship of dependency between the organisations involved is a fundamental prerequisite for conducting activities; the need for *multi-professional relationships*, as part of the child's social space, is a natural consequence of this prerequisite. Thus, the focus during assessments of efficiency needs to be shifted away from time and speed towards relationships and knowledge development between professional co-workers. Efficiency when working with children and young people is thus dependent on whether and how individual co-workers work together and develop shared knowledge in order to meet the individual child's need for support and help.

Assessment of efficiency in human services

Housekeeping with limited resources in human service organisations entails using your resources in such a way that you obtain as good an effect as possible for the target group you are working with (e.g. children and young people). The possibility of coordinating resources and efforts in these organisations is a fundamental prerequisite for obtaining more value for money, i.e. improved effects and less resources (per child). Assessing efficiency is thus not about time and speed, but about relationships and knowledge development between professional co-workers. If service processes associated with working with children and young people are described on the basis of the need for developed multi-professional relationships, we will obtain entirely different prerequisites for the discussion on how efficiency can be improved and maintained in these types of activities. For this, we need the possibility of assessing efficiency gains.

In our research, we have established that there are efficiency gains to be made when staff work with each other across organisational boundaries, with a shared target group or with individuals (see, for instance, Person and Westrup, 2014). In order to be able to show these efficiency gains, we need to calculate the cost of coordinated efforts, in comparison with traditional ways of working, as well as monitor the effects that these efforts have had either on the target group or on individuals. Such an assessment can, for instance, take individual cases that have been worked with in a coordinated way as a starting point. These cases can be compared with what the costs and effects would have been had the respective organisations been working separately with the child and family.

Let us provide a concrete example. At one of the municipalities we have worked with, a trial team was created consisting of co-workers from education and social services who work with school pupils' mental health issues in the age group of 12–16. The team's contribution was more rapid efforts and assistance for children with mental health issues, and it was also able to work with the family in focus. As the team organisationally belonged to neither one nor the other of the organisations, it was not restricted by standardised routines and procedures used in education and social services. Instead, it was able to work more flexibly as regards availability, time, and place, entailing that more children, parents, and



school staff were able to share in these efforts. This method of working resulted in it becoming significantly easier to work with the mental ill health of children.

The work of the team yielded good results for these children. These results were verified via school attendance statistics, scientific evidence-based measurement methods (SDQ Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Beck youth scales), and observations and statements from involved pupils, school staff, parents, and staff from individual and family care. In the individual cases, measurements were done before and after efforts were completed. All the children showed a marked reduction in anxiety and depression. The parents' assessment showed that they, as parents, had gained a greater understanding of their children's feelings and that these parents' worries and frustrations had decreased. In their description of the changes to their children, the parents perceived these to have become calmer, more secure, and happier, and they thus found it easier to help themselves in life. School staff also pointed out that the children had a lower rate of absence from school.

After the first year, the staff, assisted by the economists, produced a costing based on the actual cases that the team had been working with during its first year. This costing includes wage costs for hours worked and other costs linked to the case. The time estimates were done by the staff themselves (school welfare officer, psychologist, school nurse, school doctor, teacher, special needs teacher, study counsellor and vocational guidance officer, head teacher, social welfare officer, social guidance counsellor). The children's cases were divided up into four typical cases of problem situations. The calculation was compared with what the alternative cost would have been had education and social services been working separately with the child and family. The costing encompasses 27 cases where the "efficiency gain" was the equivalent of SEK 783 k compared with a traditional method of working (see Table1).

TABLE 1. Costing of efficiency gains from the coordinating of resources and efforts (in SEK).

Categories of problem situations	Costs for the team's initiatives	Costs in previous initiatives	Savings	Number of pupils	Efficiency gains
Category 1	11,692	13,716	2,024	6	12,144
Category 2	46,913	103,613	56,700	11	623,700
Category 3	24,195	126,098	101,903	2	203,806
Category 4	17,153	10,098	-7,055	8	-56,440
Total				27	783,210



The result showed that efforts of the team were cost-effective; however, the result was not just dependent on the fact that the method of working yielded good effects for the children but also on the fact that the resources, in the form of hours worked and skills, were used in a more efficient way.

Conclusions

The most important conclusion to be drawn is that the work of improving the efficiency of human service organisations requires an alternative approach or perspective as regards the concept of efficiency and, not least, as regards how this concept is to be applied. In an operation lacking ready-made answers regarding what leads to desirable results, it is important to develop knowledge that can provide explanations regarding the result. The result of the efforts made is often difficult to observe or measure in the normal sense; in many cases, the effects do not arise until long afterwards. Goals and ambitions (in accordance with ordinances such as curricula and special legislation such as the Education Act, the Social Services Act, and the Health Care Act) largely go on such long-term effects. How and why efforts or activities have contributed towards the result is, thus, a question that has to be asked if the development of advanced knowledge is to be possible. Efficient resource utilization thus pre-requires continual knowledge development. It is not just the demarcated organisation's knowledge that is important but also, and primarily, the existence of very coherent knowledge development. In this way, knowledge development is not something that can be discussed in isolation from the organisational context within which knowledge is to be developed.

Thus, it does not help to attempt, using traditional means, to raise the efficiency of organisations. Having everyone "running faster" is not the solution. Instead, the potential for increased efficiency lies in increased knowledge development in order to be able to coordinate the efforts of different organisations. Otherwise, children and young people will quite simply not get as much value for the money invested in them as they could. No support for calculations of efficiency gains will prevent joint knowledge development. It is not primarily a matter of abstract or general calculations but of concrete calculations linked to individuals and situations. This pre-requires in turn that these efficiency gains be explained, articulated, documented, and disseminated.

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