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Conditions for strengthening
the professionalism of the
case worker

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Summary

Conditions for strengthening the professionalism of the case worker

The Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate (Inspektionen för socialförsäkringen, ISF) is an independent supervisory agency for the Swedish social insurance system. The objectives of the agency are to strengthen compliance with legislation and other statutes, and to improve the efficiency of the social insurance system through system supervision and efficiency analysis and evaluation.

The ISF's work is mainly conducted on a project basis and is commissioned by the Government or initiated autonomously by the agency. This report has been initiated by the agency.

Background

Academics have for a long time argued that current approaches to govern operations in the public sector are the cause of a wide range of problems. A strong focus on quantitative targets and follow-up measurements has led to unwanted effects.

Within the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (SSIA), employees handling individual cases have felt circumscribed by too much detailed control of how their work should be carried out. In 2011, the agency concluded that they had not been making full use of their professional knowledge when dealing with individual cases. Instead, management has emphasised and rewarded adherence to standardised processes. The strong emphasis on standardised processes reduces opportunities for using comprehensive knowledge and experience in daily operations.

In order to overcome the negative effects of overly ambitious performance management, SSIA changed focus in 2012. The agency strove to reduce micromanagement and detailed monitoring of employees' individual performance. Today, these processes and process standards are now designed so that case workers have greater opportunity to determine which measures are needed in individual cases.

Objectives

The objective of the report is to gain knowledge of how the central functions within SSIA have operationalised the idea of a professional case worker when designing support for processing operations. Ideally, the professional case worker can better take advantage of their experiences and skills when they assess what needs to be done in specific cases, in order to ensure that the decisions they make are legally secure.

Methods

The study is based on document studies and interviews in the autumn of 2016 with people in core functions. Internal documents and official documents such as business plans, planning guidelines, policies and general guidelines have been studied. No benefit-specific document has been reviewed.

Those interviewed are working to develop standards for handling processes and process calculations and on the creation of the new production system. ISF has also conducted interviews with developers who are working to establish benefit-specific process descriptions and guidelines.

Findings and conclusions

The work that has been carried out by the SSIA since 2012 has been based on a systems approach which assumes that the conditions for work given to employees are more important for business performance than employees' individual performance.

Many changes have been made to allow case workers to better use their experience and knowledge. A team based approach to working has been implemented across the agency which allows various functions to work together in improving daily operations. Case workers also use teams on a local level; one purpose being to handle cases more uniformly. Guidelines and processes have been improved by emphasising the purpose of the different steps in processes and the intentions behind legal requirements. The processes are now designed so that case workers have greater opportunity to determine which inquiries and measures are needed in a case.

This study was carried out in 2016. As of 2017, the SSIA is now returning to stricter performance management, judging from new business plans and central documents. It is too early to conclude what this could mean for the past five years of work towards a more professional case worker and how the two could be combined.

It is important that the agency benefits from previous years' efforts to improve case workers' opportunities to use and develop their professionalism, in order to maximise efficiency and secure compliance with legislation.