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*MODIFICATIONS OF THE INDIVIDUAL APPROACH BY HELPING  
PROFESSIONALS IN HYBRID WORK ORGANISATION WITH THE LONG-  
TERM UNEMPLOYED*

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**Abstract**

The paper explores how professional counsellors and social workers involved in activation work with the long-term unemployed subjectively interpret the meaning of an 'individual approach' to clients in different types of cooperating organisations. The use of an individual approach and the integrated performance of different types of services is an important element of the professional logic of helping people towards participation in the labour market and social inclusion. The organisation of the performance of activation work is faced with hybridity.

This research focuses on the role of professional counsellors, who are in direct contact with clients, in modifying the rules of individual approach in two types of organisations in the Czech Republic. First, in the public employment services and second, in non-profit organisations.

The results of the comparison of interpretations in two organisational environments show that (1) in both organisations professional "front-line" workers apply different concepts of individual approach to clients. Their modified approaches and practices appear to be an active response to the need to stabilize activities in these types of organisations. (2) In some cases, professional counsellors appear to have the power to formulate and practice the professional concept of individual approach toward clients in labour offices as well. (3) It appears that only some of these modifications are helpful in solving the problems of the long-term unemployed, and others are inappropriate for the use to client activation.

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*Keywords: long-term unemployed; individual approach; organisational contexts*

**Introduction**

Long-term unemployment is a current and not easily solved problem in the Czech Republic. Despite the economic growth and stability of the Czech economy, we have failed to reduce the proportion of the long-term unemployed over the past decade. Today, the group of persons who have remained on the register with the Labour Office for more than 12 months account for 26% of the total number of unemployed (MoLSA, 2021). At the same time, the duration of unemployment in this group of jobseekers is increasing, and those with very long registrations at labour offices often lose the last vestiges of motivation and effort to return to employment. For them, long-term unemployment is a real and interrelated problem that is difficult to solve independently.

A number of research studies in the Czech Republic and other European countries show that the long-term unemployed represent a very diverse category of persons. A large proportion of them face multiple social, educational or health disabilities (Sirovátka, 2011; Percy-Smith, 2000). Research on the long-term unemployed in one of the 14 regions of the Czech Republic (the South Moravian Region) showed that only 35% of the long-term unemployed are 'hustlers' who manage to receive some personal gain through their registration at the labour office, e.g., the overlap of welfare benefits and participation in an informal labour market or payment of health insurance by the state. The remaining part of the clients recruits are (1) persons with social obligations (caring for children while on maternity leave, caring for persons with disabilities and persons with long-term illnesses), (2) persons with a specific lifestyle, often homeless or without their own housing, with various types of addictions and strong signs of a culture of poverty, and finally (3) a group of persons showing a combination of various forms of disability and old age and/or low education (Winkler et al., 2018).

All three categories of clientele show a need for an individual approach and involvement of professionals with different professional background working in different types of organisations. Professional provision of counselling and social services to long-term unemployed clients is always based on an individual approach as an important principle of the helping professions in the conceptual documents of Czech social and employment policy. It is therefore important to pay research attention to the performance of these services, which is defined not only by a particular profession but also by the broader social and organisational conditions in the context of which it takes place (Healy, 2012).

## Research problem

The presented research describes semantic modifications of the concepts and practices of an "individual approach to clients." These modifications are assumed to result from experts' responses to counselling activities for the long-term unemployed, amid incompatible institutional rules and structural conditions. While researchers have long argued that organisations must respond to multiple institutional requirements (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), depth examination of multiple "institutional logics" within organisations is more recent. This study adopts the definition of institutional logics by Thornton and Ocasio (1999, p. 804) as *"socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules."*

The presence of multiple institutional logics has been identified across various social fields, including health care and professional helping services (Nordegraaf, 2016). Existing research, however, offers contradictory conclusions about their impacts. Some researchers depict multiple logics as a threat to performance, emphasizing conflicts that lead to fragmentation (Battilana & Dorado, 2010). In contrast, others argue that multiplicity makes organisations more sustainable, flexible, and innovative (Kraatz & Block, 2008).

Furthermore, the existing body of research rarely investigates the conditions under which these different outcomes emerge. Besharov and Smith (2014) suggest directing

further research into how multiple logics manifest within organisations, as these internal manifestations vary: multiple logics may influence the core mission in some organisations (Pache & Santos, 2013), while a single logic dominates in others. This context produces two complementary research questions: first, how do multiple institutional logics form within organisations? Second, how do organisations and their actors implement these multiple logics in their attitudes and activities?

This broader formulation of the research problem is applied to the following research objective: to identify heterogeneous interpretations of the meaning of an “individual client approach” among helping professionals in two types of employment and social work service organisations in direct contact with long-term unemployed clients. Another objective is to compare these modifications between the two types of organisations. Previous findings show that institutional logics at Czech labour offices and selected NGOs differ significantly. At labour offices, bureaucratic-administrative and managerial principles prevail, whereas NGOs combine professional and managerial rules (Horák, 2018). These institutional logics are multiple, thus allowing for research on institutional complexity in these contexts.

### **Micro, meso, and macro levels of institutional logic formation for social assistance**

Institutional logics operating in public and social service organisations for the long-term unemployed are formed at three levels. At the macro level, logics result from geographical, historical, cultural, and political contexts (Greenwood et al., 2010). At the meso level, they manifest through organisational dependence on resource providers, funders, and interactions within the specific environment (Jones et al., 2012). At the individual (micro) level, logics manifest through the experience, identity, and cultural interpretations of individual actors (Lok, 2010).

These three levels are intertwined in social assistance. The microstructure is formed at the level of meaningful interpretations within the client-counsellor relationship. Here, both actors define what is understood and conducted as an “individual approach.” The counsellor’s cultural interpretation of client behaviour is based on individual experience and knowledge.

Mesostructures of institutional rules are formed through negotiation and power dynamics in intra- and inter-organisational relationships, typically resulting in norms, agreements, or contracts (Scott, 2014). Research on the Czech social assistance system shows inconsistent interaction between labour offices and non-profit organisations, such as a lack of conformity in formulating cooperation goals (Winkler & Zelenková, 2010). These discrepancies stem from differing institutional logics between organisation types or the coexistence of multiple logics shaped by employment and social policy fields. These multiple logics significantly influence the social work profession, as the identity of workers is anchored within these specific organisational settings.

Macrostructural rules are shaped by law, methodological guidelines, or the professional educational system. However, these macro rules can be significantly modified at the organisational level. Even with standardised training, professionals work

in environments with highly diverse institutional logics, ranging from state authorities to NGOs. Furthermore, political (macro) and organisational (meso) pressures introduce managerial-administrative demands, emphasizing efficiency, effectiveness, and increased bureaucratic reporting (Burton & Van den Broek, 2009). Consequently, efforts to gain client trust may be suppressed in environments strictly focused on efficiency and performance.

## **Organisational context of services for the long-term unemployed in the czech republic**

The organisation and management of services for the long-term unemployed creates an environment where various institutional rules come into contact, presenting either a structurally flexible environment or rigid barriers to individual work.

The Labour Office of the Czech Republic (LO CR) is an administrative office with national competence, strongly influenced by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. It encompasses 14 regional branches and 292 contact points, making it a strongly formally structured organisation.

Research on institutional logics at the LO CR (Vyhlídal & Winkler, 2011) showed a clear dominance of a bureaucratic administration model, characterized by an emphasis on standardisation of services and equality of all clients. Despite mutual consultations, counsellors tend to respect officially prescribed procedures, though the model also contained unexpected rules such as emphasis on informal teamwork, autonomous activity, and innovative problem-solving. Two marginal tendencies were further identified:

- 1) The public services management model: It emphasizes autonomy and decentralization of decision-making towards expert advisors, leading to a greater orientation towards collaboration with other organisations.
- 2) The de-bureaucratisation model: This signals conflicts in the organisational context. Day-to-day activities are perceived as fulfilling objectives set by someone else, making it difficult to follow formal rules. This tendency shapes an institutional logic of conflict and interest group bargaining in a fragmented system (Horák, 2018).

Non-profit organisations (NGOs) providing social services are governed by the Social Services Act No. 108/2006 Coll., requiring registration and compliance with quality standards. Professional social workers focus on helping the unemployed in adverse life situations and increasing their employment chances. The macro level is represented by legal standards and the rules of the professional institution, decoded through professional education.

Workers in NGOs are influenced by organisational rules but possess a degree of decision-making freedom related to the professional logic of social services. Discretion in decision-making provides a legitimate space for the individual's own interpretation of rules within organisational practices (Lipsky, 1980).

This independence of frontline workers can lead to structural flexibility. It involves gaining and using certain power or authority to trigger changes in organisational behaviour, a concept referred to as organisational centrality in the implementation of an institutional logic (Besharov & Smith, 2014). Similarly, the dynamic model of social work practice (Healy, 2005) emphasizes the active role of organisational actors. Here, the helping professional is seen as an active agent whose practice is dynamic, constructed in every interaction, and influenced by client needs, the biographical context of professional identity, and the broader organisational context filled with multiple institutional logics.

## **The individual approach rule in service organisations for the long-term unemployed**

The individualization of activation services in the Czech Republic occurs within two different policy approaches: one focusing on enforcement and discipline, and the other on empowerment (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007). These correspond to two activation models:

- 1) The workfare model: Entitlements to social benefits are conditioned by participation in employment or community service. This model forces individuals to accept employment under threat of sanctions (Sirovátka, 2005). Associated with the idea of personal guilt for unemployment, it subjects clients to general rules and individual control without addressing specific needs, operating within an administrative and bureaucratic institutional logic (Winkler & Zelenková, 2010).
- 2) The welfare (social inclusion) model: Focuses on strengthening the partnership with the client, developing competences through training, and selecting jobs according to qualifications and life conditions (Sirovátka, 2005). This approach relies on a professional logic of assessing capabilities and adapting measures, which demands greater financial, human, and coordination resources (Winkler & Zelenková, 2010).

Consequently, activation can be conceptualised by professional counsellors in two ways: (1) activation by participation, based on client needs and involvement, and (2) imposed participation, where the client is obliged to submit to activation conditions without expected active input (Sirovátka, 2005).

In real interactions, the effects of multiple institutional logics manifest within the interpretive activity of professional counsellors. These regulations are reflected in individual semantic interpretations, allowing frontline workers to modify the shared conception of an individual approach, provided they have decision-making freedom. These modifications can be eclectic, based on practical experience, or may imply a total transformation following an alternative institutional logic.

The performance of helping professionals is not a mechanical execution of prescribed procedures, but a complex system combining standards, rules, and formal or informal links (Vyhlídal & Winkler, 2011). While literature uses varying terminology, such as a “personalised” (Kampen & Tonkens, 2019) or “individualised” approach (van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007), the Methodology of Procedures in Public Employment Services

(MoLSA, 2015) states that an individual approach should form the basis of all counselling work. For the purposes of this research, the individual approach is considered a process of individual casework adjusted to the problems and needs of long-term unemployed clients, taking into account their life situation, with active cooperation from clients in defining these needs and establishing a relationship with the counsellor (Glumbíková, Vávrová & Nedělníková, 2018).

## Methodology

The research used a qualitative strategy to identify heterogeneous interpretations of the meaning of an “individual approach toward clients” among professional counsellors and social workers in direct contact with long-term unemployed clients. A deliberate criterion sampling method was established based on: a) work position (job placement/counselling workers at the LO CR or social workers in NGOs), b) geographical nature (South Moravian Region, ranking among the worst in long-term unemployment), and c) voluntary participation.

Collection was carried out through repeated visits to the field. First, 17 interviews were conducted at contact points of the Labour Office of the Czech Republic (LOs); the participant average age was 43 years with 16 years of average experience. Subsequently, representatives of NGOs providing social services to the long-term unemployed were contacted, resulting in an additional 12 interviews; their average age was 34 years with eight years of experience.

In both phases, low-structured conversational interviews were used to collect data, allowing for the exploration of new meanings (Lee, 1999). A total of 29 thematically focused interviews were conducted, focusing on participants’ perceptions of long-term unemployed clients, views on implementing measures, work problems, and suggestions for improvement.

The method of thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). To increase research validity, triangulation and a cyclical approach were chosen for data analysis, alongside regular reflection on the collected findings. Expert discussions, as well as rational, referential, and empirical sources, were used to verify and justify the emerging semantic categories (Constas, 1992). The names of these categories were derived from professional literature and the participants’ own expressions. By interconnecting them, thematic relevancies related to an individual approach were created.

The principles of ethical conduct were followed throughout the research (APA, 2016). Limitations include those arising from the longer period over which the research was carried out, potentially impacting how activation programmes were implemented. The findings represent an interpretation of the immediate participants’ statements and perceptions.

## Results

The findings that emerged from the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained led us to the need to generalise and relate them to organisational contexts in which counsellors operate. The semantic categories related to each theme are shown in bold and italics in the text.

### **Theme 1: Modification of the normative concept of individual approach in performance of helping professions**

During the analysis, differences in the concept of the application of the individual approach were identified. The normative concept is considered to be the answer to the question of what workers think an individual approach should be like. Based on the answers to this question, three concepts of an individual approach were found:

#### *(1) individual approach as fulfilling the purpose of registration at the LO*

- 1) Job placement staff perceive that an important characteristic of an individual approach is the consideration of the client's characteristics to succeed in a labour market and the client's ability to reconcile work and personal life. The goal of individual approach is to find employment for long-term unemployed clients, which involves a more practical view of the life situation of long-term unemployed clients by the placement staff. *"I need to explain to him that he's here because he wants the job, so we will work together to find it, and that he has to accept the fact that when the jobs come up, we have to refer him to those employers"* (R8).

#### *(2) individual approach as comprehensive assistance*

- 2) When imagining the individual approach, counsellors perceive as more important the comprehensive consideration of the long-term unemployed client's life situation and its subsequent resolution through gradual steps with the possibility of involving other professionals. *"Basically, during an individual discussion, we try to find out the reason behind the long-term unemployment and all other circumstances. Then we try to put that together with a vacancy offered by the labour office"* (R1).

#### *(3) individual approach focused on building a relationship with the client*

- 3) Social workers perceive that an important part of the application of an individual approach is building a trusting, unique relationship and partnership with the client and their significant participation in prioritizing solutions to their current life situation, which should ultimately lead to engagement in the labour market. *"It's definitely a partnership approach to the client. A joint participation in the accomplishment of some of those steps that lead to the goal that we have set"* (R20).

The analysis of the three types of concepts created pointed to further links between work positions of individual workers and instruments that they have available. A common important prerequisite in all normative concepts of individual approach is the *client's interest and active approach to cooperation*. If the client is attentive to the instructions of

the workers and his/her behaviour is directed towards achieving the goals of cooperation, the workers perceive the application of their individual approach concept as effective.

**Theme 2: The value of individual approach to the long-term unemployed is determined by the horizon of the client and social worker cooperation to achieve jointly set goals.**

One source of barriers to the practical application of individual approach is in *different expectations of cooperation* by clients and workers. Social workers document that long-term unemployed clients mistake them for recruitment agencies. Labour office workers point out that long-term unemployed clients use the registers for purposes other than job search assistance, most of which involve social benefits or health insurance payment. *“Every group has some reason why they’re here, and they try to make that reason their standard, or the problem that justifies why they’re here. Their goal is to survive at the labour office without a job offer, without being put into a retraining programme, without counselling”* (R1).

An individual approach involves voluntary cooperation of the client. However, an individual approach cannot be applied to clients who do not want to cooperate on the common goal of finding longer-term employment. Thus, applying individual approach to long-term unemployed clients may become less relevant if it is above the client’s cooperation on the determined common goals. The semantic framework of client-worker cooperation may differ in both organisational contexts due to the individual knowledge and everyday experiences of workers as well as their personalities and work identities.

All helping professionals *differentiate between their long-term unemployed clients* on the basis of their everyday experience. Even though some professionals resist differentiating of long-term unemployed clients into subgroups, differentiation takes place at least in terms of the target group setup or, in the case of a labour office, according to the criteria for inclusion in activities. In labour offices, workers distinguished between formal and informal differentiation of long-term unemployed clients. Formal differentiation is related to the possibility of applying some labour office instruments, whereas informal differentiation is used for the application of work practices. However, there is a potential risk of introducing routine practices if the clients’ life situation is not adequately assessed and the clients are stereotyped into programmes, which may not lead to the desired result meaning that the individual approach may not be adequately fulfilled.

However, helping professionals also note a changing situation on the labour market and the increase in the number of clients with multiple social disabilities, which often have structural causes. It turns out that *long-term unemployed clients*, to whom helping professionals adapt to their work practices, also *to a large extent influence the application of an individual approach*.

### **Theme 3: Modification of an individual approach by workers in response to a low capacity of social work and employment service systems to prevent misuse**

Some of the labour office workers noted a group of long-term unemployed clients they refer to as “passive” or demotivated. The clients use the setup of the registration conditions with a labour office to their own advantage and for various personal reasons want to stay registered as long as possible. Most often these reasons include health insurance payments and entitlement to material need benefits. *“If it weren’t for the benefits, we’d have half the people here. The only ones who would be here would be the people who really want a job from us in the first place”* (R9). Lack of authority is also perceived by labour office workers in deliberately influencing the content of health attestation for the LO clients issued by physicians. *“What would be interesting here is if only the employment office physician, for example, could issue those health attestations in order for this to be objective. That would probably leave almost no one here”* (R17).

*The perception of ineffective areas* in the provision of individual approach provokes not only a response from labour office workers in the form of adaptation of work practices, but also a search for solutions to work problems. Some LO workers use *the increased frequency of meetings* and the frequent issuance of referrals, which they see as coercive to activate their long-term unemployed clients. One of the instruments to prevent the purposeful behaviour of some long-term unemployed clients is also the *intensification of control activities of the labour office*. The modification of individual approach by some of labour office workers is therefore intended to increasingly structure the client’s behaviour. By considering solutions to these problems, LO workers are trying to defend the “abused” system.

### **Theme 4: Modification of individual approach by workers as a result of efforts to make client assistance more effective**

On the other hand, some labour office workers *resort to their own variations of work practices when applying an individual approach for the benefit of their long-term unemployed clients*. They show an effort to change the institutional rules of individual approach in order to influence and change the bureaucratic rules of working with long-term unemployed clients in favour of more individualised services. Labour office workers perceive some *administrative tasks* related to their work as a significant organisational barrier. *“I’m not going to fill out those spreadsheets. I’m not going to invite them in to boss them around”* (R3).

*Another limiting factor for immediate activation of long-term unemployed clients appears to be the selection criteria* based on which clients are included in the projects and activities of a labour office. An increased administrative complexity is manifested in the case of meeting a rule of a certain number of clients within the requirements of superior authorities. Some labour office workers emphasize the lack of consideration of the life situations of long-term unemployed. The workers describe their own defiant behaviour when fulfilling these job duties.

In addition to this, social workers from NGOs perceive *a great deal of discretion when applying an individual approach*; they report that the client, rather than the organisational environment, holds more power to affect a form of individual approach. In the case of complex life situations of long-term unemployed clients, these topics are subject to a *joint discussion* with colleagues during regular meetings, where work practices are clarified, and workers share their experiences. Social workers don't tend to perceive organisational barriers, they only mention administrative tasks that take up their time to spend and work with their long-term unemployed clients. Thus, some social workers bring in different variations of individual planning adapted to the target group. They often point to a perceived trust placed in them by their organisation's management. This manifestation can be put in the context of the managers' perception of themselves as part of the *work team*. There is also an apparent link with the way new staff are selected. Social workers reported that an important criterion for selecting new colleagues was social skills and how a new person "fits in" with an existing team, which they perceived as one of the important prerequisites for an effective functioning of the organisation. In social workers, expertise and experience are more prominent in the conception of individual approach (Healy 2005, 2012). *"At the same time, this group of people in that adolescence are living in the here and now and that's what our individual planning style is called"* (R18). Their expertise is then manifested precisely in their efforts *to modify work practices or guidelines in favour of long-term unemployed clients* and effective individual approach, which may contribute to changing organisational rules.

### **Theme 5: Modification of individual approach by workers as a result of the broader concept of the "client" by helping professions**

The labour office clients do not only include jobseekers but also employers who have reported vacancies to their organisation. The companies expect LO workers to refer jobseekers who contacted them about the vacancy. Labour office staff often face reproach from employers who tend to *transfer the responsibility for the client's inappropriate behaviour* during the interview on to them. This puts labour office workers in conflict situations, as they are obliged to make employment referrals for long-term unemployed clients despite their perceived passivity and refusal to work. Subsequently, they are confronted by the employer that is expecting a candidate interested in the vacancy. *"Then we feel uncomfortable to send them to that job opening because those employers often call us and complain"* (R17).

Again, there is a contradiction in *the conception of the purpose of the registration by job seekers* at the labour office from the perspective of some groups of long-term unemployed clients. The behaviour of these clients makes it difficult for the labour office staff to apply their individual approach toward both, their clients and employers. In the context of a relatively low pay, labour office staff have repeatedly pointed to the *amount of social benefits* for their clients, which in some cases is comparable to their monthly salaries. Also, the labour office workers mention *perceived prejudices and unwillingness of employers* to hire job seekers who have a health disability, criminal record, or foreclosures despite their interest in the job. *"I've had a few people here who had a foreclosure, but they were*

*active...however, the employer wouldn't take them because they had a foreclosure and that their accountants wouldn't want deal with it"* (R1). On several occasions, the labour office staff also point out the *limitations resulting from the specificities of the local labour market*, where the vacancies offered are not in line with the capabilities of individual groups of long-term unemployed clients. The reasoning of the labour office workers hints that they perceive their long-term unemployed as their priority clients compared to employers. Thus, there may be a reduction in the provision of an individual approach towards clients rather than employers.

### **Theme 6: Informal communication and coordination of labour office staff and social work services as an instrument for comprehensive assistance to long-term unemployed clients**

Establishing cooperation with organisations and workers from the external environment is a common social work practice. Social workers also cooperate to varying degrees with labour offices. However, in their statements, they also expressed their *critical evaluations of the work practices of labour office staff* in the area of information and counselling and dysfunctional communication with long-term unemployed clients. Some social workers see a solution in establishing a more intensive cooperation with labour offices and perceive their activities as a form of assistance to labour office workers. By having more time available, they perceive a *major benefit of cooperation with the LO* in offering closer and deeper cooperation with long-term unemployed clients and longer face-to-face meetings.

Social workers who already *manage to establish such forms of inter-organisational cooperation* perceived the results of the interconnected assistance to long-term unemployed clients as effective and able to respond to diverse life situations of their clients. Also, some *LO workers respond positively* to the budding cooperation with social service organisations and perceive its benefits and need. *"They get to know our options and clientele and in turn they suggest their options how to help us. By getting to know each other, it [cooperation] has opened up and improved"* (R1).

### **Summary**

The results of thematic analysis show that professional counsellors at labour offices reflect the conflicts between organisational and professional rules that cause low effectiveness of their measures. These workers create internally inconsistent, eclectic practices and approaches to clients. They actively modify rules of an individual approach in a variety of ways, ranging from impersonal, stereotypical responses to efforts to be consistent in application of professional individual approach to clients. Both organisational environments also show individual approach concepts that support professionally legitimate approaches to LTU clients. *"I'm not going to fill out those spreadsheets. And I hate what they invented up there...that you're going to do 80 people a week. I don't care, I prefer to invite them in as I see fit"* (R3).

The research concludes that an important modifying role of helping professionals has been documented. Their interpretations and practices of an individual approach can

*stimulate spontaneous changes in the performance of activation work*, especially in labour offices, but also in social service organisation.

It shows that some of the helping professionals may have the power to formulate and practice professionally appropriate concepts of individual approach to LTU clients even in the bureaucratic organisational context of public employment services. *Helping professionals, by their identity, influence the organisational context, and not just vice versa.* In this context, a new research question arises: How does a fragmented and poorly coordinated organisational environment of the Czech labour office affect the extent of spontaneous modifications?

The fact that many of the activities associated with an individual approach are carried out by staff through their spontaneous practices means that only some of these individual approach modifications help to solve real problems of LTU clients, while others are inappropriate for their employment search. These spontaneous decisions are based on personal and professional knowledge and experience gained during their work life (Ferguson 2018). Helping professionals should continue to educate themselves, develop professionally, and actively reflect not only on their own working strategies with clients, but also on the needs and interests of the organisations in which they are employed. On the other hand, it will be very useful if organisations providing social assistance for the long-term unemployed conceptually think through their HR policies and strategies for their interaction with clients (Andreassen & Natland, 2020; Glumbíková, Petrucijová & Mikulec, 2021).

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