

*University of Lugano Teaching Cases on Knowledge Communication, Case #7, 10/2004*

**Analysts of the Labour Market - Servants of many Masters**

The Knowledge Communication Process from Definition and Analysis to Transfer

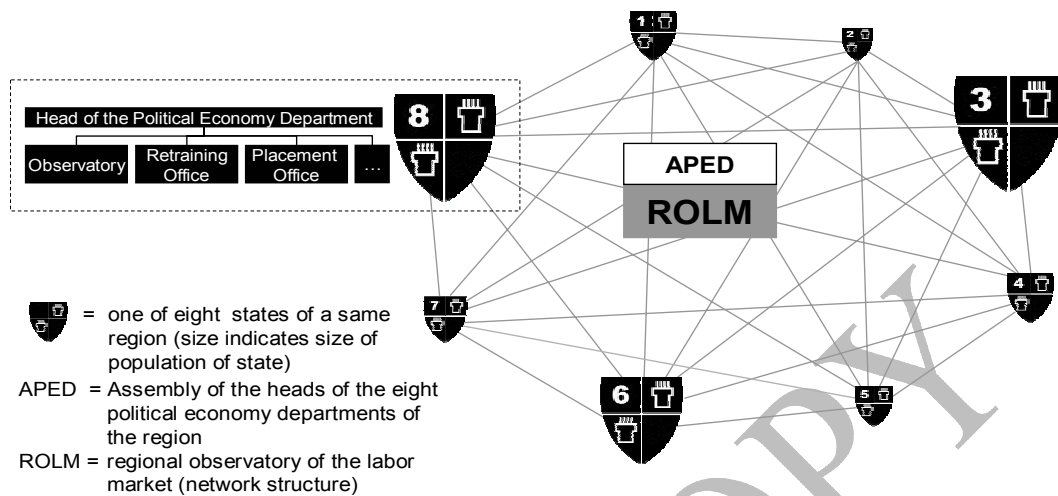
*Jeanne Mengis has created this teaching case under the guidance of Professor Martin J. Eppler. The case study is based on qualitative interviews with eight labour market analysts and with three heads of the state economy department. In addition to the interviews, a debriefing workshop was conducted. The names of the organizations and people involved have been changed. The aim of the study is to inspire class discussion rather than to illustrate the effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.*

Peter Slope has rarely felt more nervous in his life as a public servant than at the moment. He has prepared a crucial project meeting that is about to start in a few minutes. His team of 15 labour market analysts is currently involved in a project aiming to better understand the characteristics of the 50'000 people unemployed in the region at the moment (e.g. their ages, nationalities, levels of education, years of work experience). The aim of today's meeting is to share the status-quo of the project and redefine and specify its objectives (once again). For Slope's analysts it is crucial to understand the objectives of the project better, as many have complained in the past that project goals often remain too broad. The analysts often do not really know why they are asked to analyse a certain aspect (e.g. why it is important for their client to have more in-depth information on the ages of the unemployed), and what decisions this information will be used for later on. Slope feels that many of his team members are frustrated and that the tension could rise again in this crucial meeting.

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Slope is the coordinator of ROLM (Regional Observatory of Labour Markets), a state-run, regional observatory of the job market. ROLM's main activity consists in sector-wide surveys on various aspects of unemployment. The observatory provides a network on a regional level by assembling eight state observatories and giving valuable information to politicians, to the heads of the state political economy departments, to the placement and retraining offices. It receives its mandates from the Assembly of the heads of the Political Economy Departments of the eight states of the same region (called the APED).

The APED is ROLM's main partner and client. It meets four times a year and decides upon general policy within the regional labour market. The retraining and placement offices have the task of implementing many of the APED's decisions on the state or even regional level.



**Figure 1: The Regional Observatory of the Labour Market (ROLM) and its Network Structure that covers Eight States**

ROLM has the mission to develop sector-wide policies to fight unemployment and to provide rapid support for the needs of the APED and of the retraining and placement offices. To fulfil this mission, ROLM audits unemployment trends and facilitates coordination and knowledge sharing among the various labour market observatories (knowledge integration on a geographical level), and between the APED and the retraining and placement offices (on a hierarchical level).

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In the meantime, all the analysts have arrived from their various state offices and are waiting for the meeting to start, exchanging the latest news on their work, but also on other, less professional matters. A few minutes later, Slope welcomes everybody and communicates the objectives and the agenda of the meeting: first, mutual exchange on the current situation of the project; second, common refinement of the project's objectives; and third, definition of the next steps and coordination measures among the members.

With regard to the first point, Slope reminds the group that, three months earlier, at the last APED meeting, the heads of the political economy departments gave ROLM the mandate for this project. The objective of the project is to better understand the characteristics of the unemployed population in the region, and to document this analysis in a joint report. Before the project started, only the fluctuation of the unemployment rate and the average period of unemployment were known. The general idea is for ROLM to analyse various aspects of the unemployed like, for example, their ages, their educations, their work experience, or their nationalities. By correlating these

different aspects, ROLM should reveal characteristics of the unemployed population that are important for policy makers (the APED), but also for politicians and for the people who actually implement these policies (retraining and placement offices). Gaining insights into the age of the unemployed population, for example, is important for decisions on different levels. One fact is that among the unemployed there are more and more very young people who have just finished their bachelor's degree or high school, and that these people fall into unemployment more easily than older people, but stay unemployed for a shorter period of time. On a political level, the information about age is important when politicians have to decide upon school system reforms, when they decide about creating more places for apprentices, or when they negotiate with labour unions about job security. For the heads of the various political economy departments, this information is important in order to decide upon the general policies of reinsertion measures for unemployed youngsters (e.g. offering internships rather than providing them with educational programmes). For the retraining and placement offices, finally, the analysis of the characteristics of the unemployed population should help to align the courses offered and placement services more precisely with the features of the unemployed and of the labour market. In this way, ROLM's analysis should support a variety of decisions. "This shows you a little bit in which contexts our survey should be used", Slope says, but admits: "It is true that, up to now, the overall objective has been very general, and that is something we have to work on this afternoon. One main reason for the broad and imprecise definition of this project is certainly that, at its origin, there was a consensus within the APED, as is true for all the ROLM projects. In fact, the head of each political economy department has particular problems within his state, and the objective of the project has to be broad enough to include these various concerns and interests." At this point, one of the analysts interrupts Slope and says: "I completely understand this, but on the other hand, we spend weeks working without a clear goal and without knowing the daily context of our clients. Last week, for example, I worked for hours on labour market indicators until I realized that they wouldn't be of any help at all for the real needs of the heads of the political economy department. This really is a waste of time, and you know it is quite hard for me to imagine what they expect. I don't know their daily concerns." Another analyst adds the following: "I do agree that, at the beginning, the request isn't something substantial, like 'you could do this or that,' as if the APED didn't know what they wanted. But I have had the experience that when we show them our first results, they can articulate their needs more specifically." And with that comment, Slope and his colleagues are in the middle of yet another heated debate.

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Slope is aware of the problem that is now being discussed: the mandate is not communicated all at once; rather, the definition of the mandate is a continuous process of refinement. In fact, the need for a study can have different origins, it might stem from the offices that are in daily contact with the unemployed (retraining and placement offices), but might also derive from social partners, or from the heads of the various state economy departments themselves. Then, the APED agrees upon a problem to

analyse and ROLM elaborates a project outline, which again is validated by the APED. On this basis, ROLM starts a first broad study that leads to an intermediary report. This report is then presented to the APED and its members, who give general feedback and further refine the mandate.

In the opinion of many analysts, the problem with this refinement process is that it often takes too long (up to 6 months), and that it actually has no clear ending, i.e. a point (or scope) after which no more modifications can be communicated. One analyst voices this issue: “What makes me a little bit mad is that some department heads complain our reports and analyses are already outdated the moment we have finished them. But they forget that they have a lot of the responsibility for these delays. How can we shorten the process of definition and refinement of the mandate if the APED only meets every third month? Apart from these rare meetings, interaction with the department heads is very difficult and rather formal because – especially in the big states in which the heads of the political economy department manage up to 400 people – they have a lot of other concerns, and it is difficult for analysts to ask clarifying questions.”

Another analyst suggests that a solution could be to involve the offices that actually deal with the unemployed earlier on, maybe already when defining the mandate of a new project. That could be a solution at least for the projects in which ROLM’s analyses have repercussions not only for the APED, but also for the placement and retraining offices. In this way, they would actively involve the people implementing the decisions ROLM is providing information for. “That might be a way to get more context information”, Slope argues, but indicates at the same time that, “in the past, it was quite difficult to get attention and interest from the placement and retraining offices. They have serious time constraints as well, and are so deeply involved in their daily concerns that they are not very used to taking a more distant perspective. In a way, I can understand them, why should they be interested in our macro economic information?”

With this comment, the attention of the analysts switches from the definition of the mandate to the communication of the results. “One main problem is that our reports are mainly written for the needs of the APED and contain more strategic macro-information”, one analysts says, “but the placement and retraining offices actually need more practical, more operational information and recommendations. And finally, there are our social partners like politicians; they need even more macro-economic information than the heads of the political economy departments.” “But how can we deal with all these different requests in one single report?” another analyst asks, “we are the servants of too many masters!” “Maybe we should restructure our reports so that the information relevant to the various audiences is easily visible. Or maybe we should think even further, and develop other ways of communicating our results, like distributing newsletters, or doing more mirrored presentations.” “In fact”, someone else claims, “we shouldn’t limit ourselves to communicating our purely quantitative results. We have to exploit the information we provide on the various levels and in various

services. We have to relate to the people who actually give advice to the unemployed population. On the basis of the insights of our analyses, we should elaborate for these offices – and maybe in collaboration with them – specific recommendations that are tailored to their needs!”

At this point, Slope interrupts the discussion. Once more, he realizes that the meeting is going in a completely different direction from what he planned. But he also realizes that the issues that his analysts are bringing up are really important. As a matter of fact, the problem of the ill-defined mandates has direct repercussions on the transfer of results. This is true for the long periods of time that ROLM needs for the elaboration of reports, which are linked to the difficult refinement process of the mandate. But Slope also thinks that ROLM’s reports only have a relatively low impact on the practices of the placement and retraining offices, because their staffs are insufficiently involved in the process of defining the mandate.

After this quick reflection, Slope proposes two things to his team of analysts: “I think this is an extremely important discussion we are having, but for now let’s focus on our current project, let’s share our current findings, and try to refine the scope of this analysis. In this way we can present the status-quo at the APED on Friday week, and outline what further information we need from them in order to be able to refine the objectives of the project and conduct an analysis tailored to their needs. Secondly, I would propose forming a working group to analyse the direct links between the difficulties in defining the mandate and the communication and the transfer problems of our results. This group would also suggest steps for overcoming these problems. In particular, the group will have to elaborate how to involve the final clients of our reports better, both in the process of defining the mandate and transferring our results, and how to communicate our results in a more personalized way.

The analysts briefly discuss Slope’s suggestions, but then agree on the approach proposed. They form the working group to elaborate the problems encountered in defining the mandate and communicating the results in a more analytic manner. It should particularly focus on the linkages and repercussions between the two. After this first analytic part, the group is to elaborate ways of shortening the process of refining the mandate and improving the transfer and communication of the results. Then, Slope and his analysts finally start a more focused discussion on their current project.

The day after, Slopes sends an e-mail to the working group, in which he lists some guiding questions for the tasks.

Put yourself in the situation of the working group and answer the following questions:

- What are the main reasons for the imprecise, broad and difficult **definition of the mandate**?
- How are the problems discussed in the definition of the mandate related to the problems during the transfer phase?
- How could one shorten the process of refinement of a mandate?
- Do you know any other contexts in which the decision maker has difficulty in defining a problem him/herself, but is able to identify it, when it is presented by someone else (e.g. by an analyst)? What are the implications of this ASK-syndrome (Anomalous state of knowledge = decision maker does not have the necessary knowledge base to really know what to ask for) in these contexts?

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- What are the main challenges in the **communication of results**?
- How could ROLM better adapt the communication of their results to the needs of their various target groups (APED, placement and retraining offices, social partners)?
  - How could ROLM personalize their reports?
  - Apart from the reports, what other forms of communication would be helpful to better contextualize ROLM's results in the daily concerns of their audiences and to collaboratively develop concrete proposals? Define a communication plan with the different communication instruments at your disposal.
- In which other contexts do experts have to communicate their knowledge to three different audiences (politicians, policy makers, policy implementers), and support different types of decisions (from strategic, long-term decisions to operational, short-term decisions) with their insights?