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The Passport4Work project Journal N° 1

Project led by the City of Eindhoven



**JOBS & SKILLS
IN THE LOCAL ECONOMY**

The Passport4Work project – P4W

Passport4Work (P4W) takes place in the Dutch Brainport region, also known as the “silicon valley of the Netherlands”. In this region, there is a growth paradox. Continued economic growth coexists with a growing distance to the labour market and decreased employability for the lower-educated workforce. Stakeholders on both the demand and supply sides of labour have called for a structural change.

P4W addresses this call for a structural change by creating a solution which redesigns the journey to (re)employment for the lower educated workforce. To achieve this, an intersectoral transformation of the labour market is pursued through the development of a low threshold, intersectoral platform on which job seekers can create their own “passport for work” profile. Through this P4W platform, a strong link will be established between employers, employees and educational institutes to foster sustainable matches on the labour market. Innovative features of this platform include gamified, personalized assessments and eLearnings tailored to target user needs, as well as a foundation, or “golden standard” through which information on skills can be effectively used for job matching purposes.

Partnership:

- City of Eindhoven
- UWV
- Province of North Brabant
- Participation Employment Agency
- Organiq
- Building Changes
- WeEindhoven
- Transvorm
- Tilburg University
- MKB Eindhoven

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Eindhoven labour market is suffering from mismatches. On the one hand, there is a growing number of vacancies and a shortage of qualified personnel, whereas on the other there is a growing number of individuals who struggle to find suitable employment. This growing divide can at least partially be ascribed to a lack of transparency. Both jobs and job seekers are extremely heterogeneous, and information about compatibility between the two is not readily available. In the midst of these search frictions, both parties are forced to invest a significant amount of resources in pursuit of a match.

Mitigating these search frictions is at the core of the Passport4Work (P4W) project. The project aims to alleviate these by introducing skill-based “passports for work”, through which (intersectoral) matches with employers can be realized. In essence, P4W represents a highly personalized and gamified platform, through which individuals are guided in the development of their passport for work (by means of gamified assessment). P4W focuses heavily on soft skills (or: general skills, transversal skills; e.g. presenting or analyzing) to broaden the scope of search to different sectors of industry.

In the past year, a lot of groundwork has been done to facilitate the realization of a robust platform. Core areas include the development of a “golden standard” of skills (to prevent different understandings and definitions of a skill standing in the way of a match), aligning the project with other relevant initiatives, and preparing for the

actual building, testing and implementation of the P4W tools which will commence in 2021.

With regards to the challenges surrounding implementation, the project faced significant difficulties in maintaining a shared vision with a participative approach across all of its 10 partners. A lot of time has been invested in discussing the project vision and the implications for delivery partner’s tasks and responsibilities. Advancing insights and subsequent changes have called for many collective and bilateral meetings to ensure suitable commitment and ownership levels.

Furthermore, the communication with target beneficiaries is now lagging behind due to a shift in project strategy. Initially, the idea was to kick-off the communication activities upon the completion of the first prototype. However, in retrospect the project team feels these activities would have been better conducted in parallel. The team is now prioritizing the development and execution of an external communication strategy, to connect with the target users as quickly as possible.

One policy-specific challenge pertains to privacy legislation (GDPR). A passport for work comprises a lot of sensitive, personal information. Privacy legislation poses certain restrictions on which information can be processed within P4W. The project team is gathering the required expertise to pinpoint the exact implications.

Significant efforts have been made with respect to the upscaling challenge. A considerable amount of time and effort has been spent on presenting and discussing the project with other relevant (national) organizations and networks. As a result, the project is engaged in several cooperative efforts and pilot projects with involved stakeholders. One example is “CompetentNL”, a nationwide initiative for realizing the earlier mentioned “golden standard” of skills.

2. THE PROJECT AND ITS POLICY CONTEXT

Passport4Work seeks to improve matching on the labour market by inducing more transparency on labour market demand and supply. This is necessary, because, as in many other regions, the labour market in the Brainport region is suffering from mismatches. Several sectors of industry experience a shortage of personnel, while there is a large pool of individuals that could potentially do the job. These are, for example, superfluous and on the verge of redundancy in another sector, looking for a job better suited to their profile, or simply unemployed and unable to shift from a position in social welfare to work.

Naturally, to a certain extent unemployment is a given in any economy due to the inherent complexity and unpredictability of work. However, there is growing belief that a considerable portion of unemployment is in fact structural and the result of a lack of transparency.

Transparency is of critical importance, given the heterogeneity of the labour market: it comprises many different parties in pursuit of a match (e.g. widely differing experience levels, educational attainment, skill proficiency and organizational requirements). To make matters even more complicated, some parties are more self-aware and honest than others.

As a result, there is a lot of time and money involved in the realization of a match: CV creation, writing job application letters, recruiting, conducting job interviews and assessments; all activities designed to mitigate the uncertainties stemming from two unfamiliar parties wishing to

engage in a fruitful professional arrangement. The relevance of these search frictions has been theorized by Diamond, Mortensen and Pissarides, for which they were awarded the Nobel prize in Economics in 2010.

Led by the city of Eindhoven and rooted in the Dutch Brainport region, Passport4Work (P4W) aims to contribute towards the required transparency for labour market matching by alleviating the above described search frictions. It helps both workers and firms find each other in a meaningful, substantiated way. It is an online platform where job seekers can discover, develop, and share their individual talents through their “passport for work”.

This passport consists of structured information pertaining to job matching, with a strong focus on transversal skills (also known as soft skills, or general competences). This focus is justified by an increasingly skill-based economy, in which the life expectancy of workers is increasing, but the life expectancy of skills is in fact decreasing (mostly due to rapid technological innovation). By structuring this information in accordance with existing (international) skill standards and frameworks, P4W strives to contribute towards a new “golden standard” through which transparency is achieved.

Achieving such a golden standard has been attempted in the past. Several (international) skill taxonomies (extensive libraries of skills including information on their definition and occupational relevance) have been developed, among which the US-based O*NET and the European ESCO

frameworks. However, thus far, efforts to bridge these existing frameworks, and thus avoiding a lock-in effect, have been unsuccessful.

An example of a recent attempt to bridge existing skill frameworks is the “Let’s Connect” project, which also took place in the Brainport region, between 2012 and 2015. Establishing a “interoperable framework of skills” was one of the objectives of the project. In this project, this objective was ultimately not reached, mainly due to two reasons: first of all, the tough sell of its necessity in times of economic recovery, and second, due to the relatively abstract nature of the topic. At the time, skill taxonomies were not as developed and a rarity in policy discussions. However, there are some valuable lessons that can be drawn from the Let’s Connect project, which inspire the effort in P4W.

These lessons include, first of all, the use of strong incentive systems to encourage individuals to disclose information on their skills (and other relevant attributes), second, the need for a “passport for work” to be selective and structured by nature in terms of its contents, to ensure efficient matching procedures, and third, to maintain acceptable levels of validity and reliability of data on skills (to prevent matchmaking on false grounds). Fourth and last, the passport should be part of a broader platform, linking relevant stakeholders (jobseekers, employers, educational institutes) within one accessible ecosystem.

In P4W, the city of Eindhoven targets specific groups of beneficiaries, for which there is a high sense of urgency. These include those with a relative distance to the labour market in terms of their educational attainment, and employment history. These beneficiaries are actively involved in the design and use of the P4W instrument. Target beneficiaries are addressed in three

sectors of industry that have a high regional significance: healthcare, construction and technology. To illustrate, the Netherlands is undergoing a “energy transition” from fossil fuels towards renewable energy sources, reflected by the Eindhoven project “gas-free neighborhoods”. P4W contributes to this project by facilitating adequate staff in the construction sector.

Job seekers can build their passport in two ways: by uploading information that is readily available in other career-based systems (of which there are many), or by completing a gamified assessment available through the platform. The former is heavily reliant on the earlier mentioned innovative structuring of information, through which exchange of information across systems can occur. The gamified assessment serves to promote the engagement levels of the target users. Furthermore, depending on the proficiency levels of the transversal skills, eLearnings are accessible through the platform to offer direct opportunities for further professional development. Links to external education are also available. This results in job seekers being able to discover their skillsets, while also developing these in quick succession to build their employability. The job seeker can then share his or her passport with prospective employers, who can decide whether to engage in a matching procedure.

Ultimately, P4W seeks to create a highly personalized and gamified platform, through which intersectoral mobility can occur for those with a distance to the labour market and, in a later stage, beyond. P4W facilitates “free travelling” on the labor market where it will be easier for job seekers to move in and between sectors. Through P4W, employers can easily find qualified employees for the jobs of today and the future. The gamified assessment and “golden standard” of skills can potentially benefit and inspire other EU- regions as well.

3. THE PROJECT'S IMPLEMENTATION SO FAR

In the past year, the gist of P4W's efforts have been directed at the establishing of appropriate project conditions. The P4W team comprises ten public-private partner organizations, a sizable collective which requires a fitting organizational structure through which ideas can flourish, expectations can be (re-)aligned and tasks can be allocated effectively.

The project got off to a challenging start, with changing partner representatives causing frequent re-alignment meetings (on both a bilateral and collective basis) to ensure the maintaining of a shared vision across all public and private partners. This alignment process is expected to continue on an on-going basis.

The formulation of key performance indicators and a validation plan has certainly helped in this regard, as it has guided many of the vision-oriented discussions by emphasizing the practical implications of discussions on an abstract level.

The project officially kicked-off on the 13th of June with a well-visited event in Eindhoven where 85 representatives of local and national representatives came together to discuss the project and its added value. An impression can be found here: <https://www.uia-initiative.eu/en/news/kickoff-project-passport4work>



A fundamental part of the project is the realization of a golden standard of skills, which serves as the foundation for the P4W platform and tools. This process commenced with an elaborate analysis of existing skill standards' merits and constraints. For instance, the "richness" of the information - e.g. does it link skills with specific occupations or merely describe skills? -, its accessibility/ simplicity, and the frequency and quality of periodic updates. This analysis resulted in the decision of taking the American O*NET framework as a robust basis for the golden standard.

The O*NET framework will be supplemented with other prominent frameworks (e.g. ESCO) to ensure all systems built on it speak the same language when it comes to skills (more on this in an upcoming ZOOM IN article). The O*NET framework will also be used as a basis for the gamified assessment.

Two major innovations with regard to the realization of the golden standard include the translation of the O*NET framework to the Dutch A2 level and the contextualization of the US-based O*NET framework in the Netherlands. The former will enhance the comprehensibility and usability by the target beneficiaries, while the latter ensures that the linking of skills to occupations is validated in the Netherlands by surveying employers and employees (in O*NET, this is done through the surveying of US-based employers and employees, and as such the framework may be prone to contextual error when applying it in other countries).

Another core activity has been the seeking of complementarity and cooperation with other relevant initiatives. In the Netherlands (and beyond), there are many entities working on overlapping activities when it comes to the

development of a skill passport and a golden standard of skills. This exploration has resulted in several cooperative efforts, to prevent the reinvention of the wheel and to ensure compatibility. Examples include pilot projects with private vendors, collaborations with other major cities of the Netherlands, aligning with relevant nation-wide initiatives (e.g. CompetentNL) and the exchange of project insights with other UIA projects.

In preparation of the development of actual tools, insights were collected through surveys and interviews with employers, knowledge centers and employees. One shift in this regard has been the slowing down of the sprint pace of the prototype development to allow more room for the gathering and processing of these insights, which cost more time than anticipated, but are deemed necessary to develop a validated and widely accepted tool.

In 2020, the focus of the project shifts from the above-mentioned groundwork towards the building, testing and implementing of the innovative P4W prototypes. The first prototype is a gamified validated assessment of soft skills (based on elements of Role Playing Games – RPG – and neuro-games). The first prototype is nearing completion and will be tested with a panel of representatives from the target audience, to further inform and optimize the user experience design (UXD). Prototypes for the passport comprising personal data (on hard and soft skills) will also be tested.

2020 will also kick-off the communication activities to deeper involve and inform (external) stakeholders. For instance, an increasing group of target users will be involved in the further testing and iterating of prototypes.

4. IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

Challenge 1. Leadership for implementation

Relevance of the challenge

P4W comprises a large and diverse project team representing both public and private organizations. Some partners are operating in a highly political environment. While this provides a strong base with a broad range of expertise and experience, it also poses challenges with regards to the development and maintaining of a shared vision and the prospering of innovative ideas. As such, the partners have invested considerable time in the start-up phase to establish a suitable basis for collaboration through which the project's ambitions can be realized.

Mitigating the challenge

Aligning all partners on one shared vision, with well-defined action-based work streams requires strong (political) leadership is critical for an effective implementation and has taken up the bulk of the time in the start-up phase of the project. This process was complicated by several changing representatives among partner organizations over time (in some cases, at the executive level). As a result, a lot of time was spent in onboarding replacements and gaining their support and ambassadorship for the project through bilateral meetings.

A major accelerator in this regard is the fact that P4W is strongly rooted in existing partner initiatives and prominent societal developments. For instance, P4W contributes to important labour-oriented goals of the municipality of Eindhoven (life-long learning, sustainable

employability) and strengthens the “gas-free neighborhoods” project by facilitating required workers to shift to this sector of industry through their passport for work. Furthermore, tailor-made eLearnings are offered to further develop skills and to keep them up-to-date. P4W also contributes towards a local project aimed at the integration of refugees through its accessible gamified assessment. This makes the project both tangible and relevant.

Challenge 2. (Smart) public procurement (using public spending to leverage more local innovation)

Relevance of the challenge

Public procurement has strained some of the project's execution through some inherent inconsistencies between EU and local regulations. With regards to the appointing of staff and the procurement of services, this can cause a complex puzzle to be solved. For example, flexible employment contracts among partner staff members did not fit the more classic model of employment relations as stipulated by the EU. These regulations also put a hamper on acting quick on certain innovative decisions.

Mitigating the challenge

Ultimately the above-mentioned issues were resolved by respectively engaging in permanent employment contracts and trying to organize procurement activities in parallel to other activities as much as possible, to minimize time lost on procedural efforts. It is recommended, however, that urban authorities try to create

more degrees of freedom for the administrative side of project execution.

Challenge 3.

Organizational arrangements within the urban authority to deliver integrated innovative projects (cross-department working)

Relevance of the challenge

The managing urban authority (MUA) of P4W, the municipality of Eindhoven, has initiated the project as part of its labour market policy. Given the fact that P4W is embedded in several ongoing local initiatives, there is a strong cross-departmental cooperation through its delivery partners. For instance, one involved department is working on improving labour participation rates in the region, whereas another specifically targets with refugees. Furthermore, the Province of North-Brabant is working on a robotics agenda, to which P4W also contributes. Since the tools built in P4W can contribute to the value chains of each, they are closely involved in the project and alignment within and across the city's departments is vital.

One particular issue with regards to organizational arrangements is the required ability to devise innovative, out-of-the-box solutions. When it comes to developing unprecedented tools or ideas, sometimes it can be beneficial to look for input beyond the municipality's expertise. Sometimes, this can be a tough sell for which diplomatic sensitivity is required.

Mitigating the challenge

The MUA is working with a loose governance structure when it comes to P4W and its related internal projects. The department of economic affairs is in charge of the day-to-day management of the project, with separate links to each of the

other departments involved. In principle, involving these departments is at the discretion of the day-to-day management. However, given the political nature of the environment, it is important to keep other senior decision makers within the municipality informed on the course of action, and to substantiate innovative decision making through compelling argumentation. By keeping the municipality informed on its progress through sharing information on project vision and its progress, other departments which could contribute to the project as well stay connected.

Challenge 4.

Participative approach for co-implementation

Relevance of the challenge

Similar to the first challenge, the number of partners is a complicating factor. There is a handful of partners that are clearly at the forefront of driving the project forward. While this core team is functioning well, ensuring the (pro-)active involvement of other partners is not an easy feat. When prolonged, this structure is prone to misbalanced levels of ownership, commitment and ultimately innovative strength. There is also a strong contingency regarding the sharing of available data on jobseekers (which could benefit from using P4W).

Mitigating the challenge

To help getting all partners on board, an extensive deep-dive workshop was organized with all partner representatives to expand on the initial project plan by further detailing the value of the project, the benefits for each of the targeted stakeholders and establishing suitable roles and responsibilities for each of the partners involved. Furthermore, many bilateral meetings with individual partners were organized to further

improve their commitment levels by discussing the mutual added value of their participation and the project outcomes. While this certainly strengthened the development of a shared vision on the project, securing on-going commitment and ownership across all partners remains a significant challenge.

One way to address this is to keep tabs regularly by building in frequent touchpoints. This is also crucial for maintaining the required level of agility for innovation, since roles and responsibilities can sometimes be fluid. Advancing insights (and changing project requirements) can cause shifts in terms of who is best equipped to take on a specific role or task. To manage this effectively, strategic and operational meetings are held on a weekly basis, as well as day-to-day meetings among project members. A core strategic team has been appointed which drives decision making, with flexible links to the other partner representatives.

Challenge 5.

Monitoring and evaluation

Relevance of the challenge

Establishing impact is key for guiding the project activities and ultimately reaching its objectives. While P4W's initial project plan displayed a clear sense of urgency towards specific labour market needs, it was also relatively abstract. This could potentially burden the execution of workstreams, and when not translated into well-defined actions could hamper public adoption, scalability and also transferability to other regions.

Mitigating the challenge

P4W created a separate work package to further detail the monitoring and evaluation of the project, to be executed by Tilburg University. The

university has a track record of involvement in similar projects and a strong labour market orientation, and as such has been able to guide discussions on pinpointing P4W's societal impact in a comprehensible and scientifically grounded manner. Particular attention is given to the establishing of (randomized) experimental studies, through which the net effects of P4W can be established. Examples of indicators include the employability of workers, its utility for recruitment within organizations, and whether P4W succeeds in contributing towards the realization of a "golden standard" of competences. This evidence-based approach is adopted to inform learning loops in the development of the different prototypes, as well as to generate substantiated insights in the project's accomplishments, which can also be used to drive communication campaigns towards P4W's stakeholders.

Challenge 6.

Communication with target beneficiaries and users

Relevance of the challenge

P4W is a cooperative effort, which follows the principles of Quadruple Helix: co-creation among academia, government, private industry and local citizens. The end users -including employers and jobseekers- are insufficiently represented now. This was a conscious decision, the project team decided to prioritize the development of a first prototype over the approaching of the target audience. In retrospect, the project team would have preferred to do this in parallel. After all, support of the end users is critical and prior projects have shown that elaborate platforms have been built which ultimately perished due to a lack of a supporting user base.

Mitigating the challenge

The project team is working out an external communication strategy to help involve and commit both employers and job seekers. The project team is looking to coincide these communication efforts with the launch of the first prototype, as a means to generate excitement of the target audience. In addition to these activities, P4W is also in the midst of preparing a website through which policy-makers and practitioners can be informed of the project's progress.

Challenge 7. Upscaling

Relevance of the challenge

A crucial pitfall here is the earlier mentioned reinventing of the wheel. There is a plethora of initiatives and organizations (with a long history of) working towards similar goals and ambitions. Seeking complementarity and cooperation is crucial to avoid contribution towards

fragmentation. It is also vital to cater to the needs of relevant market players (i.e. online intermediaries which will ultimately use the golden standard of skills).

Mitigating the challenge

P4W has invested considerable time and efforts in embedding P4W in relevant (national / institutional) initiatives. A lot of time has been invested in meeting with representatives of these initiatives, including the similar House of Skills project in Amsterdam, and the Community of Practice "Skills Ontology" in which several leading stakeholders set out to realize a widely accepted standard of skills. This has resulted in cooperative efforts around several of P4W's goals and prevents fragmentation. Furthermore, to actively involve market players, pilot projects are being setup with several online recruitment intermediaries to test the principles behind, and the feasibility of the exchanging of skill-related data. As such, the conditions for upscaling are being established early on in the project.

5. POLICY-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES

Challenge 8.

Privacy and ownership of data

Relevance of the challenge

At the core of P4W is highly personal, sensitive information on an individual's skills and other personal characteristics used for labour market matching. The gamified assessment, for instance, results in personal insights on an individual's soft skills. In someone's passport for work, this information could be supplemented by other data, such as their educational history, personality or even their health and wellbeing. However, whether this information is permitted to be used in P4W is heavily governed by general data protection regulation (GDPR).

Mitigating the challenge

One specific example of GDPR's impact on P4W is the fact that a person's social security number cannot be distributed through P4W. This calls for alternative ways of linking a passport to its belonging individual. To come up with alternative solutions, P4W is gathering specific expertise among its partners on the applicable GDPR legislation to ensure information included in P4W tools is collected and processed on a legitimate basis. Through a meticulous analysis of the regulations, implications for design are identified.

6. CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

P4W is rooted in a complex environment. There are a lot of intricacies involved in the development of the gamified P4W platform and its tools. The realization of a “golden standard” of skills, for instance, is a complex ordeal and involves many (national) stakeholders. Furthermore, the relatively large number of project partners is the source of several impeding factors, mostly related to project leadership and the realization of a participation approach, with equal levels of commitment and ownership. The project team has developed several measures to mitigate these in the first year of the project (introducing a core decision making team, organizing a substantial amount of collective and bilateral

meetings). The project has also invested a lot of time in ensuring a future-proof development, by seeking cooperation with relevant national stakeholders, which could foster adoption rates and the institutional embedding of P4W.

In 2021, the project shifts from vision building and planning towards building, testing and implementation of the actual platform and its tools. The next journal will be dedicated to a reflection on this more technical side of the project. It will discuss the extent to which the project’s mitigative efforts have paid off and whether current, and new challenges permeate throughout this phase.

Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) is an Initiative of the European Union that provides urban areas throughout Europe with resources to test new and unproven solutions to address urban challenges. Based on article 8 of ERDF, the Initiative has a total ERDF budget of EUR 372 million for 2014-2020.

UIA projects will produce a wealth of knowledge stemming from the implementation of the innovative solutions for sustainable urban development that are of interest for city practitioners and stakeholders across the EU. This journal is a paper written by a UIA Expert that captures and disseminates the lessons learnt from the project implementation and the good practices identified. The journals will be structured around the main challenges of implementation identified and faced at local level by UIA projects. They will be published on a regular basis on the UIA website.



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