



Work First USA – How it all started with Dutch Work First

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How you're doing? How are You? Smiling Americans constantly beat your ears with "exaggerated kindness". Try not to answer, because they are already 5 yards away. They are not interested in your answer anyway. How easily confuses a Dutchman this form of American politeness and positivism with antisocial behavior? No problem, if you do not look over the fence.

In the United States of America (USA) there is a common feeling that with hard work you can make your dream come true. And it happens. Still there are people who start as a street vendor and years later they have build a huge company from scrap. It can happen. In for example The Netherlands or Scotland (United Kingdom) that is much more complicated, because you need the necessary papers, permits and certificates. In the USA, you can determine your life yourself. The better the American performs the more he earns, the greater his status. Scoring points is important in the USA. Every company we visit as Dutch delegation in Milwaukee, Wisconsin is number one in their business area! The intermediary bodies Maximus, UMOS, and sheltered company MCFI (Milwaukee Center For Independence) are "America's finest!" Best training center, best outflow rate, largest arbitration body of the USA, even of the world! If you've been to Wisconsin, you don't need to visit a mediation body somewhere else. In terms of presentation and public relations we can learn something from the Americans. And we Dutch criticsasters consequently keep on asking: "But what goes wrong? And yes that part is ok, but that is no good, do you have any figures of that?". No, they have no statistics of that, and certainly not for external use. Americans are not very interested in presenting bad results in the media, because it is very difficult to upgrade your profile with bad stats!

How is it that these American companies are so successful with Work First? One explanation lies in the history of the country. Already in the thirties they designed very successful major employment projects (e.g. New Deal). A region-specific statement is the fact that the people in Wisconsin in 1996 have introduced a rigorous change. They threw away the warm goat wool socks and open sandals. Instead they have purchased a whole new pair of cotton socks and shiny black college shoes. Nobody gets rewarded for completing work methods and procedures in the same old familiar way! Everyone was thus forced into a culture change. The introduction of the Work and Welfare Act in the Netherlands (WWB) in 2004 can partly be compared with what happened in Wisconsin. This radical change in Dutch law, ensured that more efficient work methods occurred in the Netherlands. After all, the municipalities became responsible for finance and any setbacks they had to pay themselves. However, there are two essential differences with the situation in the Wisconsin. The philosophy of the WWB was already largely reflected in the old Social Assistance Act ((n)Abw) and the same people who carried out the old Social Assistance Act, now carry out the new Work and Welfare Act. Of course everyone has to do Work and Welfare courses, and everyone is urged that a change in thinking must be made. The fact is that this only works if you put everybody through an intensive cultural program. Everybody has to move in the same direction. In 1996 Wisconsin has given the cultural program a massive injection by literally changing the system radically. Indeed, the need for a new ideology and way of work goes much faster if you disassemble the social service system and sack every employee of that system. Strange people those Americans! But than again, all those employees could apply for the new jobs in this new system. But they would only get this job if they met the criteria set by the intermediaries with their brand new social system and contracts.



The tender of those contracts in the state of Wisconsin is no small thing (think of a European tender including ESF and multiply this by two) and are drawn in such a way that the mediation authorities know perfectly well what they have to score. They receive a fixed budget allocated to which they both pay benefits as the employment mediation. How the reintegration providers / organizations spent their money is up to them, if the outcome is that the unemployed are helped into a regular job. All procedures and methods are designed to create success. As soon as possible the company has to perform efficient and effective, getting good results. This means that the longer the route to work is, the more money there is spend on benefits. Part of the 'profit' is for the arbitration body and a portion returns to the government. If an organization fails to help beneficiaries in an efficient way to get a job, this organization risks to be replaced by a competitor at the end of the contract (2 years).

Get a job, perform well and score points! Those are the things you have to do to upgrade your profile (CV) in the U.S.A. The entire society is permeated with it. In both Chicago as Milwaukee the vacancy bulletins fly past your ears. The Chicago Tribune Jobfinder, Employment Source, Employment Times, Business Resource, etc. are all provided for free. Work First is the policy, is the culture. The intermediary bodies are addicted to (the willingness to) perform, to be the best in matching jobseekers. The case manager has to show that over and over again. Internally, there is continuous communication which results are to be delivered. To the unemployed clients the message is clear: "Work pays off! If you work you get a bonus fee, that's fair!", is argued in Wisconsin. An essential difference with the Netherlands is that we work with sanctions. In terms of approach the American variant is much more positive. But what happens if the Work First principle is not worked out properly by the case manager? Don't be mistaken! The American work culture is really tough. Your boss at the Social Service does not care how you do it, he only wants that the case manager produces and achieves output. Because if you do not function as you should and you do not get enough outflow, then there is an inflow of 1 case manager into unemployment... and suddenly you stand on the other side of the counter. Another example: The Bargato Casino in Atlantic City has a "Maintain-your-weight-or-loose-your-job policy". Are you a few pounds overweight (the bandwidth is 7%), then you get suspended for a certain period of time and if the situation does not improve, you get fired. The American etiquette in the e-mail traffic is also very strict. Between U.S. companies e-mails are only about work. For example, it is not allowed to write about something else than work-related topics. And just forward a mail is also not done. For that you need to ask permission from the original sender. Mmm, that goes a bit different in The Netherlands.

The introduction of the new system in Wisconsin resulted in 50% reduction of the case load within a year and since then continued to have a downward trend. Further, the percentage of single working mothers increased by 30%. These are incredible statistics. The customer-oriented approach of the case manager, wanting to be the best of the class (because then you get a bonus fee) is in Wisconsin perfected and could easily be taken over in the Netherlands. Rectification, a lot of municipalities and social services (each municipality can make this decision on it's own) have copied (and searched for their own) performance-based oriented model. Furthermore, maintaining on a high level has also contributed in Wisconsin to achieve huge successes. Now in 2015 we can look back and see that most Dutch municipalities have introduced their own variant on this system (with or without the Werkcenter Model) during the last decade. Why? Because the results are guaranteed. What do you know, the European stats show that the Netherlands are leading the pack for over a decade now showing the lowest unemployment rates in the European Union. And yes, they also have the lowest unemployment rates under young adults.

A few facts

Letting somebody go because he or she isn't performing (because of illness) for a period of time was and is still unthinkable in the Netherlands if you already have a job. But exclusion of immigrants and single men is very common in America. In fact only a single parent has rights on a unemployment benefit (the exception is the state of New York, they also give families unemployment benefits). And



in the Franciscan Outreach Association, a Catholic organization in Chicago that gives shelter to the homeless, there are also sleeping men who have 2 fulltime jobs, but do not earn enough to pay the rent. A full time job at minimum wage is in no single state in America enough for a family to rent an apartment with two bedrooms. Chicago has about 4000 homeless people, but the 3395 crisis places that are available were reduced with 38% a few years ago.

A poverty trap is not known in the U.S.A., poverty is. 35 Million Americans live below the poverty line and 9 million children have no health insurance (although Obama Care is tackling this currently). Those are also facts that are part of the U.S. As a short summary can be stated that Work First is a very effective tool, but must be preceded by an intensive culture change process, taking the Dutch achievements into account.

Dutch Work First in 2015 –

You have the right to learn, You have the right on a job or voluntary work!

The succesfull Dutch social experiments and projects nowadays are aligned to the dominant Work First ideology of he past. Work First (through numerous variations: target group young people; with emphasis to gate keeping, through work with keep of benefit, through subsidized wages, etc.) has been ruling in the Netherlands for almost a decade. Through this Work First System the Netherlands was leading the pack regarding lowest (youth) unemployment in Europe. The Budget cuts as of 2012 changed the social landscape (less commercial providers and trainers, more done by the case managers of the municipality and their aligned foundations & companies, although work first elements were included in the ideology of today: It's your duty to do something for your benefit (the system pushes people into 'voluntary work'; And the young people aged 18-27: No benefit for them they have the right ' to learn or to work'. The Work First ideology ruled the Dutch Welfare to Work system in the period 2003 -2012, but was dismantled fast by the Dutch municipalities since 2012 because of the major cutbacks. Strong elements aligned to this period such as own responsibility, self-reliance and empowerment remained and developed locally in social experiments.