At the heart of Flexicurity:

The contribution of private employment agencies to active labour market policies
Executive summary

Private employment agencies provide solutions to tackle key labour market challenges.

Private employment agencies are intermediaries that help to address key labour market challenges and efficient partners of public employment services. Services provided by private employment agencies contribute to more effective active labour market policies (ALMPs) by:

• Putting more people to work: Private employment agencies improve the ability to match the supply of labour to demand. As a result, they allow for higher participation rates in employment and increase the diversity of the labour market. In addition, private employment agencies are an engine for job creation, currently employing 3.3 million agency workers (daily full time equivalent) across Europe. Continued structural growth will raise this by 1.6 million to reach 4.98 million jobs by 2012. In addition to these 1.6 million new jobs, the industry can create a further 570,000 extra jobs (just across four countries, namely Belgium, France, Germany and Spain) if two specific restrictions on temporary agency work are lifted: sectoral bans and limitation of reasons of use.

• Facilitating transitions: Private employment agencies contribute to facilitating transitions in the labour market: from unemployment to work, from education to work, from household to work and between different labour contracts. They provide an important stepping-stone to the labour market and help particularly to re-integrate the ‘outsiders’ into the labour market. On average, 30 to 40% of the agency workers are in long-term employment a year after their first agency work assignment.

• Supporting transformations: Private employment agencies enhance the employability of workers, particularly by facilitating access to training and by offering the opportunity to acquire professional experience in various, different working environments.

• Cooperating with Public Employment Services: Private employment agencies cooperate with public employment services in the framework of active labour market policies, sharing candidate and job vacancies database, assessing jobseekers’ skills, facilitating access to training for jobseekers, and providing outplacement services to help unemployed re-entering the labour market.
Main Eurociett recommendations

- EU Member States should take more proactively advantage of the work opportunities provided by private employment agencies in their labour market policies, which should be framed by a flexicurity policy approach. It is in this context that Eurociett advocates lifting outdated and unjustified restrictions to the use of agency work.

- The contribution of private employment agencies to more effective, active labour market policies should be fully used by establishing and strengthening cooperation with public employment services, particularly in the areas of the (re-)integration of the unemployed, in facilitating access to training and in offering individualised support to jobseekers.

Case studies on involvement of private employment agencies to ALMPs in Europe

This leaflet presents several best-practice examples on the involvement of private employment agencies in active labour market policies of the EU Member States, which illustrate how the industry helps to address the labour market challenges outlined before.

- The positive contribution of agency work to better functioning labour markets, helping to put more people at work, had already been underlined by the European Employment Task Force chaired by Wim Kok in 2003. In its report, the Task Force called upon Member States “to work towards the removal of obstacles to temporary work agencies, rendering them attractive and effective intermediaries in the labour market, offering improved job opportunities and high employment standards.”

- In a joint declaration, Uni-Europa and Eurociett agreed that active labour market policies need to be strengthened by fostering cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies, thus facilitating transitions in the labour market and helping to get more people back to work.

- Similarly, the European Commission has identified active labour market policy as an essential element in the common principles of Flexicurity, helping to (re-)integrate the unemployed into the labour market and enhancing the employability of workers. Within the Flexicurity pathways, the European Commission has encouraged EU Member States to establish and develop the cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies.

- The EU Employment Council has recognised in December 2007 the contribution agency work provides to the labour market, stating in its official conclusions that “temporary agency work is seen as a key factor in meeting the requirements of the Lisbon Strategy, as it contributes to increasing both employment and competitiveness.”

- At international level, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) encouraged national governments in its Convention 181 to establish forms of cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies. The Recommendation 188 (1997) of the ILO, which accompanies Convention 181, reinforces the importance of encouraging this cooperation.

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Political background

Active labour market policies as a means to address labour market challenges

Putting more people at work and facilitating job creation:

- A majority of countries in the EU continues are facing a high level of unemployment (amounting to an EU average unemployment rate of 7.0% in October 2007), which corresponds to approximately 16.1 million unemployed people in Europe. In addition, many labour markets in Europe face a high degree of persisting, long-term unemployment, which amounted on average to 3.6% in 2006.

- At the same time, an increasing number of countries are confronted with shortages of labour for certain qualifications and professions, with approximately 3 million job vacancies that cannot be filled. When willing to putting more people to work, Member States have to address particularly existing mismatches between demand and supply in the labour market.

- Labour market rigidities are currently still widespread and hinder the creation of new employment opportunities in Europe. Therefore, many EU Member States need to adapt national labour laws as outlined in the European Commission Green Paper on the «Modernisation of Labour Law». Reforming national labour markets and labour law can contribute substantially to the adaptability to change and to the creation of new employment opportunities. As an example, the private employment agency industry in Europe is currently still facing a significant number of unjustified restrictions, particularly with respect to temporary agency work activities. Several of these outdated restrictions severely limit the job creation potential associated with temporary agency work.

- Furthermore, labour markets in Europe currently still face a lack of flexibility, particularly as the main focus in most Member States is laid on promoting the indefinite employment contract as the standard form of contract. It needs to be recognised in national labour market policies that an increasing number of companies, but also a growing number of workers, are looking
for more flexible forms of employment, which allow for working only during certain periods of the year, on a part-time basis or based on flexible working arrangements. A Eurobarometer survey published in October 2006 illustrates that 76% of Europeans agree that lifetime jobs are a thing of the past and 71% also believe that transitions in the labour market should be made easier. 72% have a real preference for more flexible work contracts. EU Member States should accept this demand for more flexible and diverse forms of employment and integrate them proactively in their active labour market policies.

- Private employment agencies can provide an essential contribution to putting more people at work. They already employ an average of 3.3 million workers (full time equivalent) on a daily average. Continued structural growth will raise this by 1.6 million to reach 4.98 million jobs by 2012. Without the services provided by private employment agencies, 80% of these jobs would not be created.

Facilitating transitions

- Within the modern, rapidly changing market economies, fewer and fewer workers have one and the same job for life-time. At the same time, more and more workers express a preference for not staying in the same job, but for progressing in the labour market by moving from one job to another.
- The policy approach of enhancing flexibility while maintaining work security is frequently associated with the concept of transitions implying, particularly, facilitated moves from unemployment to work and between different jobs.
- Labour market regulation and active labour market policies should be oriented towards supporting workers in coping with and managing these transitions. To do so, labour market policies have to facilitate the access to new jobs and employment.

- Based on the concept of transitions, labour markets need to support people that are trapped in unemployment or inactivity. EU Member States particularly need to develop tailor-made solutions for labour market outsiders (being the unemployed or inactive workers).
- Private employment agencies contribute to addressing this challenge by facilitating the transition from unemployment to work and by helping workers to move from one job to another. Research shows that agency work provides an important stepping-stone to permanent employment, as 30 to 40% of the agency workers find a permanent job within a year after their first agency work assignment.

Supporting transformations

- Job profiles, required skills and qualifications are rapidly developing and changing in modern, knowledge-based societies. In this context, the creation of new jobs is shifting more and more from the manufacturing industry to the services sectors, with a significant amount of new jobs being created in services. According to figures published by the European Commission, the services sector accounts nowadays for almost 70% of the Community GNP and jobs, offering considerable potential for growth.
- In order to adapt the workforce to these changes, national governments need to facilitate transformations in the labour market, helping workers to acquire new skills and professional experience to adapt to the needs of companies and to fulfil their own ambitions.
- Private employment agencies support workers in managing transformations in the labour market by facilitating access to training and by offering opportunities to acquire professional experience in various, different working environments. In several EU Member States (e.g. France, Italy, Spain, Netherlands and Belgium), the agency work industry has set up jointly with its sectoral social partners training funds that provide training programmes for agency workers and support them in increasing their employability. In France, the training fund FAF-TT has an annual budget of 290 million €, based on which more than 250,000 agency workers are trained each year.

Enhancing cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies

- Cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies can provide an essential contribution to address key labour market challenges, helping to put more people at work and enhancing their employability. By generating additional public budget income through tax and social security contribution, private employment agencies furthermore increase public revenues, which in return could allow public authorities to implement complementary active labour market policies and re-allocate public funds.
- Based on positive experiences in several EU Member States (see case studies 9 to 12), cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies should be supported and strengthened, particularly in the following areas:
  - In providing tailor-made services to the job-seekers and targeted assistance for long-term unemployed and disadvantaged groups, supporting them in their efforts to be re-integrated into the labour market;
  - In facilitating access to training and providing opportunities to gain professional experience, thereby enhancing the skills of the unemployed and strengthening their employability;
  - In offering complementary services to the public sector such as skill assessment or outplacement, private employment agencies help reducing unemployment and integrating more people into employment.
Putting more people at work and facilitating job creation: In order to facilitate the transition from unemployment to work, national governments should promote the increased use of agency work, which helps to create jobs that otherwise would not exist and act as a stepping stone function to the labour market. Flexible and adaptable labour markets usually have higher participation rates; new employment opportunities are more easily created. Countries that have recently lifted restrictions on temporary agency work and adopted a more flexible regulation (such as Germany, Italy and Spain) have experienced increased labour market participation.

It is in this context that Eurociett advocates the lifting of remaining, unjustified and outdated restrictions on temporary agency work, which are currently still widespread in several EU countries and include particularly sectoral bans and limitation of reasons of use. Private employment agencies should furthermore have full access to government funds and programmes of active labour market policies. Workers taking part in joint projects focusing on their skills development and employability should continue to receive unemployed benefits.

Finally, it needs to be better acknowledged that private employment agencies can be an efficient instrument in an active ageing policy. Private employment agencies offer flexible forms of employment that are increasingly demanded by workers and contribute to an improved work-life balance. Especially older workers frequently have a preference for working on a more flexible or part-time basis, which can be provided through agency work. In their efforts orientated towards increasing labour market participation, Member States should therefore take advantage of private employment agencies in the (re-) integration of older workers.

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Lifting restrictions would create an additional 570,000 jobs in 6 countries* by 2012

Sources: More work opportunities for more people. Unlocking the private employment agency industry’s contribution to a better functioning labour market. Strategic report for discussion commissioned by Eurociett (2007).

Allowing for transitions: Based on the fact that staying in the same job for life-time is getting less and less common in the European economies, as stated by 76% of Europeans\(^8\) and considering the fact that 72% of the European citizens believe that work contracts should become more flexible, there is an essential need to allow for more and easier transitions in the labour market. National governments should implement reforms that ease transitions in the labour markets, particularly by allowing for an increased use of temporary work agencies as facilitators of transitions.

Case studies 5 and 6 describe the contribution of private employment agencies to transition in the Netherlands and Germany.

Promoting transformation and enhancing the employability of workers: Active labour market policies should engage more proactively in facilitating transformations in the labour market and in adapting labour law regulations and practices to fulfilling both the needs of companies and the career expectations of workers. Private employment agencies can provide an important contribution to enhancing the employability of workers, particularly by offering opportunities to acquire professional experiences in various working environments and by facilitating access to training for workers. Therefore, national governments and their public employment services should cooperate with private employment agencies in enhancing the employability of workers. By providing assistance in finding new employment opportunities for the job seeker and by identifying skills and competencies that should be further developed through training, private employment agencies furthermore offer career coaching to their agency workers, thus enhancing their employability.

Case studies 7 & 8 illustrate the role of private employment agencies in supporting workers in the process of transformations for France and Spain.
• Implementing the Lisbon Strategy, particularly through national reform programmes and active labour market policies: Active labour market policies have been identified as an important pillar of the European Union’s Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs in Europe, as well as in the Flexicurity debate. EuroCiett fully supports the policy approach of promoting and strengthening active labour market policies at national level, which should be framed by a European benchmarking and an exchange of good practices between the EU Member States.

It is in this context that EuroCiett encourages Member States to include agency work in their national reform programmes of the Lisbon Strategy, specifically regarding:

• Guideline 17 on labour market policies, using the cooperation with private employment agencies as an instrument for more effective, active labour market policies.

• Guideline 19 on active inclusion, thus considering agency work as a stepping-stone to the labour market for disadvantaged groups (particularly for the long-term unemployed, disabled, returning women and ethnic minorities).

• Guideline 21 on flexicurity, thus recognising the contribution agency work can provide in meeting the demands for labour market flexibility and work security expressed by both companies and workers. National policies should take advantage of the contribution agency work can provide to the implementation of the eight common principles of flexicurity agreed at European level.

In implementing such a policy approach based on Flexicurity, EuroCiett furthermore advocates that ILO Convention 181 on private employment agencies should be ratified by more European countries, as the convention acknowledged the benefits of cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies and provides an adequate framework for organising the positive contribution of private employment agencies to the labour market.

Case studies 9 to 12 focus on cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies in Germany, Belgium, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Active labour market policies
Best practices on private employment agencies’ involvement

With regard to all key labour market challenges and corresponding to the main EuroCiett recommendations, positive examples and best-practices can be identified for the agency work industry and its present involvement in active labour market policies in several Member States.

That being said, it should be taken into consideration that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to active labour market policies at European level. Labour market policies need to be adapted to national and local needs.

The following best-practice examples can, however, serve as benchmarks for national employment policies and labour market reforms. Furthermore, the examples presented demonstrate the need to engage more proactively in an exchange of good practices between EU Member States, to encourage mutual learning and to cooperate more actively with private employment agencies in the design and implementation of active labour market policies.

Putting more people at work and facilitating job-creation

1. United Kingdom: REC (the UK Private Employment Agency association) and Job Centre Plus, the national Public Employment Service, have signed in 2005 the first ever pan industry Diversity Pledge. It covers both the public and private recruitment industry and encourages recruitment agencies and job centres to actively seek out more diverse pools of candidates. Employers increasingly need to build truly diverse workforces to achieve success. Promoting diversity and abiding by best practice will also promote inclusion in employment to the betterment of UK society. This is also reflected in recent statistics, which illustrate that 33% of the agency workers have a real preference for diversity in employment through temporary agency work.
2. Belgium: The service voucher system, introduced in 2004 by the Belgian federal government, allows individuals to purchase a government-subsidised domestic cleaning service (e.g. house cleaning, washing, ironing). The main advantage of the service voucher system is that social charges and income taxes are pre-paid. Temporary work agencies have been granted the right to distribute these service vouchers and today employ more than 40% of the workers placed through that channel. The system has had a positive impact on the labour market and led to the employment of roughly 42,000 people in 2006. 58% of these workers were previously unemployed (average length of unemployment prior to introduction of service voucher employment was 3.7 years for 2005) or inactive. Furthermore, 10% of voucher users admitted they previously had an incentive for undeclared work before the service was introduced, and 23% admitted that without the system they would have otherwise used undeclared workers. The reduction of undeclared work is not only beneficial to governments, but also to workers, with 50% stating that voucher services keeps them from performing undeclared work.

3. France: The majority of newly created jobs in France have been underpinned by temporary agency work. According to figures published by UNEDIC, the bipartite body that manages unemployment allowances, the salaried working population has risen by 48,740 in 2004, of which 8,930 are temporary agency workers. In 2004, temporary agency work accounted for an 18% net increase in new jobs whilst representing less than 4% of salaried work. New jobs increased in 2005: out of 210,000 created, 42,000 were temporary agency work. Thus temporary agency work contributed to 20% of the new jobs in France. Looking over a long development phase, a clearly defined correlation between salaried working population and temporary agency work can be seen. The combination of temporary agency work flexibility and greater acceptance by sector professionals these last 20 years has boosted employment growth. During the 1980s, a 2% rate of growth was needed to guarantee net employment creation, whereas now it is between 1 to 1.5%.

4. Poland: Poland suffered from a high unemployment rate in recent years, having reached 20% in 2002. In order to join the European Union, Poland was required to substantially decrease its rate of unemployment, increase workforce adaptability, and enhance labour market flexibility to face market changes. The Polish government recognised temporary agency work as a significant solution for addressing these challenges and decided to legally recognise and regulate temporary agency work in July 2003. As in other countries, private employment agencies proved their efficiency at curbing joblessness: In 2006, Poland’s unemployment rate had dropped to below 15% of the active workforce, a large part played by the private employment agency industry.

5. Netherlands: In the Netherlands, social partners reached an agreement containing three main ingredients: (1) limiting the consecutive use of fixed-term contracts; (2) eliminating administrative obstacles for temporary work agencies while integrating agency contracts in employment law and replacing public regulation to a large extent with collective bargaining; (3) providing for a regulatory framework for non-standard contract forms in the labour code, by introducing a presumption of law to prevent manipulation and introducing minimum protection and payment. The deal became law as the “Flexibility and Security Act” and came into force on 1 January 1999. The law provided a solid basis for a more flexible labour market, in which workers can move more easily from one job to another, taking advantage of private employment agency services, including temporary agency work.

Facilitating transitions

6. Germany: In the framework of recent labour market reforms, Germany has lifted several restrictions faced by temporary work agencies, particularly with regard to agency work contracts. These reforms have contributed substantially to an increased use of temporary agency work as a means to access and remain within the labour market. The number of agency workers increased in recent years from 288,000 in 2001 to 500,000 in 2006. Temporary agency work in Germany is frequently and increasingly used by long-term unemployed and other target groups. According to recent statistics, 70% of the agency workers in Germany have been registered as unemployed prior to their first agency work assignment. Agency work therefore contributes to facilitating the transition from unemployment to work, as well as the transitions between different jobs and contracts in Germany.
Supporting transformations

7. France: The French agency work federation PRISME and its social partners have set up a joint training fund, which contributes to facilitating transformations in the labour market, enhances the employability of workers and helps them progressing in employment. Since its creation, the FAF-TT supports temporary work agencies and agency workers through training programmes to improve their performance and thereby to adapt to current market needs. In doing so, the FAF-TT has set up two priority objectives: To exchange information and best-practices between private employment agencies and to support the agency workers in developing their skills and competencies. The annual budget spent on training in the framework of FAF-TT amounts to €290 million. Based on the agreement reached between social partners, around 250,000 agency workers are receiving training every year.

8. Spain: As in other countries such as Belgium, Italy, France and the Netherlands, training is one of the principal focal points of the private employment agency industry. This has given birth to SINDETT, a bipartite training fund that embraces the two largest trade unions and the employment agency industry. This has given birth to SINDETT, a bipartite training fund that embraces the two largest trade unions and the employment agency industry. SINDETT embraces the two largest trade unions and the employment agency industry. This has given birth to SINDETT, a bipartite training fund that embraces the two largest trade unions and the employment agency industry. SINDETT follows several strategic approaches to reach its objectives: Providing workers with the types of services provided by the agency work sector and agency workers through training programs aimed at acquiring, updating and improving specific competencies as well as transversal ones; promoting the integration of groups with low employability; adapting training content to workers’ employability.

In 2005, SINDETT enhanced employability of more than 3,500 workers from 120 private employment agencies through training programs. All workers, regardless their geographic location, can benefit from this opportunity (20% from Andalusia, 18% from Madrid and 17% from Cataluña). The SINDETT budget for 2005 reached €3.5 million.

Cooperation between public employment services and private employment agencies is an established element of active labour market policies

9. France: Through its cooperation with the national agency work federation (PRISME), the French public employment services (ANPE) aims at increasing knowledge on job vacancies, promoting social inclusion and the re-integration of the unemployed into the labour market. Cooperation agreements with private employment agencies have a particular long tradition in France, with the first agreement signed in 1994. The main objectives of the cooperation are to facilitate information exchange on job vacancies, to help provide work opportunities to the unemployed and to implement joint projects funded by the ANPE for target groups. In quantitative terms, 86% of the vacancies put forward to the agency work sector by the public employment services have been filled within three months. Furthermore, strengthened cooperation with public employment services has contributed to an enhanced recognition of agency work services in the labour market. Based on these developments, restrictions on the types of services provided by the agency work sector could be lifted, offering now new opportunities in the area of outplacement and permanent recruitment.

10. United Kingdom: The national federation of the agency work industry in the United Kingdom (REC) and Job Centre Plus (the public employment services) have been working together for many years and have implemented several joint projects. Cooperation focuses on advertising vacancies in the agency work sector via the Job Centre platforms and a general cooperation agreement. The REC has furthermore developed a user guide, illustrating to small agencies how they can benefit from cooperation with the public employment services. In order to develop cooperation on an ongoing basis, the REC is implementing quarterly meetings with the public employment services to discuss strategic issues and aspects of common concern. The cooperation established shows promising positive results, as 15% of all vacancies published by Job Centre Plus are coming from the agency work sector and 26% of the Job Centre Plus offices receive support from the agency work sector in finding new employment opportunities for target groups (like long-term unemployed, older workers or disabled).

11. Netherlands: The public employment services in the Netherlands are cooperating closely with the private employment agency sector, focusing on a strengthened knowledge exchange, on providing access to databases and public employment services (Centraal voor Werk and Inkom) have furthermore contributed to improving the understanding and knowledge on both sides, thus enhancing labour market participation and re-integration.

12. Germany: A framework agreement on the cooperation between the German agency work federation BZA and the public employment services BZA and the public employment services has been signed, aiming at a strengthened recognition of private employment services as a labour market intermediary providing more work opportunities to more people. Access to public databases is provided to the agency work industry based on the agreement and regular discussions are held on ways to address key labour market challenges. Based on these forms of cooperation and the recent reforms in the German agency work regulation, the agency work sector could further strengthen its role as key access channel to the labour market, helping to re-integrate the unemployed.

Footnotes

2. Eurociett / Uni-Europa: Joint Declaration in the Framework of the “Fluxibility debate” as launched and defined by the European Commission, February 2007. Text is available online: www.eurociett.eu
8. European Commission, Towards common principles of Flexicurity, p. 5.
9. A more detailed breakdown of the status of agency workers prior to their first agency work assignment in Germany is available on the BZA website: www.bza.de
Eurociett is the European organisation of Ciett, the International Confederation of Private Employment Agencies. Eurociett is the authoritative voice representing the interests of agency work businesses in Europe and is an official Social Partner for the temporary agency work sector within the framework of the European Social Dialogue. It is recognised as such by the EU institutions (Commission, Parliament, Council) as well as by key European stakeholders (Uni-Europa, ETUC, BusinessEurope, NGOs).

Eurociett is the only association representing Agency Work at large (bringing together 26 countries) and in its diversity (represent seven of the largest multinational staffing companies worldwide – Adecco, Kelly Services, Manpower, Randstad, USG People, Vedior and Allbecon Olympia) – as well as tens of thousands of SMEs. Eurociett members consist of private companies operating in the following HR fields: temporary agency work, permanent recruitment, interim management, executive search, outplacement and training.

Eurociett promotes the contribution of millions of agency workers to our economy. Representing a well-regulated industry, members of Eurociett refuse to compete to the expenses of workers’ rights and work hand-in-hand with governments to fight illegal work and social dumping.

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