

Co-producing better futures in employment services: The Co-Production Labs of Offenbach Employment Agency



Introduction

The Offenbach Employment Agency *MainArbeit* embarked on a co-production journey in 2019, which started with the Co-production Star Action Learning Programme delivered by *Governance International*. While many staff members were already familiar with aspects of user and community co-production the training programme provided a methodological framework and space to experiment with new co-production initiatives within Co-Production Labs.

This case study will highlight the results and experiences of five Co-production Labs based on co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-assessment of employment services in the Offenbach Employment Agency.

[back to the top](#) 

Objectives

The co-production initiative of the Offenbach Employment Agency needs to be understood in the context of legal and political changes of employment services in Germany. The so-called "Hartz 4" reforms of the German social care and employment services launched in 2005 meant that unemployment benefits for the long-term unemployed were integrated with welfare benefits. The reasoning behind these fundamental labour market and welfare reforms was the provision of integrated services in order to achieve a holistic approach for service users. Basically, employment agencies were to be transformed into 'one stop shops' to provide counselling and placement services but also support and financial assistance for job-seekers and their families, and the payment of welfare benefits.

As a result, 408 so-called 'Jobcentres' were established at the local level throughout Germany as integrated service providers providing 'passive' benefits, 'active' employment services, and social services for clients with specific needs. There are two types of Jobcentres in Germany: 303 Jobcentres are consortia of municipalities and the Federal Agency for Employment while another 105 Jobcentres have become local government agencies, including the Jobcentre of Offenbach Council. It is important to note the term 'Jobcentre' in the German context is not equivalent with operational jobcentres in the UK, which is why this case study uses the term 'Employment Agency'.

Offenbach Employment Agency (*MainArbeit*, to give it its local name), is an agency of the Municipality of Offenbach, which has about 138,000 inhabitants and is located on the River Main in an urban area bordering on Frankfurt. The population of Offenbach has the highest proportion of immigrants of any city in Germany, with close to 40% of inhabitants being non-German. The Municipality is undergoing a deep structural change. It has been a centre of manufacturing (e. g. leather goods, machine-building, electrical appliances), but since 1975 has lost almost 80% of jobs in these sectors. The growing service-sector has not so far compensated for this loss. As a consequence, the unemployment and poverty rates are much above the national and regional average. The Municipality is addressing these issues through an integrated economic development strategy, with integration and employment as top priorities.

The key objective of the co-production training was to support *MainArbeit* to develop innovative co-production approaches with service users, so that it could extend its programme of counselling and placement of unemployed people eligible under Social Security Code II (in German SGB II). In particular, the Co-Production Labs, which are an integral part of the overall *Governance International* Co-Production Star training programme, enable staff to experiment with new ways of collaborating with service users as active partners, in order to achieve improvements in the public outcomes or efficiency of *MainArbeit*. The aim of this action learning process was to develop the creativity of front-line staff, managers and service users, so that they could co-produce new solutions together through co-commissioning, co-designing, co-delivery

About this case study

[introduction](#)
[objectives](#)
[leadership and change management](#)
[obstacles](#)
[outcomes](#)
[costs and savings](#)
[learning points](#)
[further information](#)

[Tweet](#)

Main Contact

Dr. Matthias Schulze-Böing
Geschäftsführer
MainArbeit, Kommunales
Jobcenter Offenbach
E-Mail:
schulze-boeing@offenbach.de

Dr. Elke Loeffler
Director
Governance International
E-mail:
elke.loeffler@govint.org



This case study was written by Elke Loeffler and Matthias Schulze-Böing in September 2020.

and co-assessment of specific employment services, which were considered to be suitable for co-production approaches

[back to the top](#) 

Leadership and change management

Offenbach Employment Agency has a national and international reputation for being highly innovative. An openness toward innovation strongly characterises the organisational culture. As the training programme revealed, not only top and middle managers but also front-line staff have innovative ideas on how to improve the employability of their service users through co-production. However, to test some of the innovative ideas external support was needed to facilitate an experimentation process and to provide key stakeholders with a shared understanding of co-production and tools to put new co-production approaches into practice. Therefore, the Offenbach Employment Agency commissioned *Governance International* to deliver a co-production training programme.

The training programme consisted of five full-day workshops based on the five-step approach of the *Governance International* Co-Production Star Toolkit. This included

- Step 1 (Map It!) - mapping existing and new co-production initiatives,
- Step 2 (Focus It!) - prioritising co-production initiatives based on priority outcomes,
- Step 3 (People It!) - finding the right stakeholders (including service users and members of communities) who can make the strategy succeed. This includes experimentation (within 100 days approximately) with the prioritised co-production initiatives based on the *Governance International* Co-Design Toolkit.
- Step 4 (Market It!) - communicating what works and how it works, which involves assessing initial evidence of outcome improvements.
- Step 5 (Grow It!) - making the results sustainable by scaling the experimentation and developing prototypes for wider and deeper co-production.

Participation in the training programme was voluntary. The training not only involved staff members of *MainArbeit* but also interested representatives of third sector partners of *MainArbeit*, which created additional synergies. Altogether 35 participants took part in the training, which was highly interactive and involved group work tailored to the work context of the participants.

At the heart of the training programme were the Co-Production Labs. They followed the mapping of co-production in *MainArbeit* in Workshop 1, the prioritisation of new ideas for co-production in Workshop 2 and role plays related to individual capability assessments in Workshop 3. After this preparatory work the participants were invited within the Co-Production Labs to experiment with the prioritised co-production initiatives, bringing in service users who were interested in becoming co-producers.



The Labs typically consisted of small teams and worked largely autonomously with guidance and coaching by *Governance International* throughout the process. In particular, each Lab was introduced to the methodology of the *Governance International* Co-Design toolkit which distinguishes five co-design phases:

1. *Experience*: This first phase involves framing the co-production challenge or defining the problem to be solved. In this phase, professionals are provided with user or community perspectives on their experiences to enable them to see issues through the eyes of service users or communities. This may require trust-building activities – for example, Co-Production Lab 5 engaged in sports activities to get to know each other before running a workshop together.
2. *Explore*: This second phase typically aims at developing insights and ideas through brainstorming and other creativity techniques. It involves prioritising

the ideas gathered in order to decide which ideas are going to be developed further and tested. In Co-Production Lab 3 ('Co-designing service offers from the 'Luise 34' second-hand shop') staff had engaged with service users in a capabilities assessment which resulted in lots of offers. As it was not feasible to experiment with all the suggested initiatives within 120 days, staff members and service users decided together which suggestions were most promising.

3. *Experiment*: In the third phase, priority initiatives are tested in an iterative process in order to develop prototypes. This allows action learning, which is documented in a workbook so that each Co-Production Lab can share the learning within the team and with other Labs as well. Co-Production Lab 3 (Co-delivering peer support for and with people seeking a job) managed to develop two prototypes for matching of service users as peers and is currently working on a digital prototype of its peer support model.
4. *Evaluate*: In the fourth phase, the lessons learnt are evaluated more formally, based on qualitative and quantitative approaches. Depending on the (intermediate) results achieved, the co-producers may decide to move to the next step and undertake more testing with different groups, with a view to scaling the new co-production initiative, or a decision may be taken to go 'back to the drawing board', changing the co-production approach and testing the modified approach again. In particular, the Co-Production Labs 3 (Co-commissioning 'employability budgets' with young jobseekers) and 4 (Co-delivering peer support for and with people seeking a job) repeatedly invited their co-production champions to undertake self-assessments to identify the progress made toward jointly defined milestones.
5. *Evolve*: In this phase the focus is on scaling the prototype, which typically requires further experimentation with other groups. Furthermore, some degree of institutional anchoring is required so that the co-production can be widened and deepened. As a first step, Offenbach Employment Agency changed its commissioning strategy to incorporate co-production into the contracts with service providers when appropriate. Currently approximately 70% of all contracts going to tender explicitly require an element of co-production.

In Offenbach Employment Agency the Co-Production Labs were given explicit permission to make mistakes but had the responsibility to document the lessons learnt in a workbook and to share them within the organisation. The Labs therefore provided staff and service users with a space to test experimentally the prioritised co-production initiatives on a small scale over 100 days. (However, as the start of the Labs coincided with the holiday period, it was agreed to extend them to 120 days).

Each Co-Production Lab was coordinated by two staff members who volunteered to lead a specific co-production initiative. In some cases, the Co-Production Lab was led by a staff member of *MainArbeit* and a staff member from a third sector partner. The top managers of *MainArbeit* demonstrated commitment to and support for the Co-Production Labs throughout the process. The kick-off meetings of each Lab was facilitated by *Governance International*. However, the Labs were free to organise themselves and to convene whenever and wherever they wished. During the experimentation phase some service users who participated in the Labs developed strong leadership skills. This was most obvious in the 'Peer Support' Co-Production Lab which matched up tandems of service users and enabled them to help each other to improve their employability (Neseli and Herpich 2020). In the Lab 'Citizen Symposium', one service user came forward and offered to provide a presentation at a public event to share his experiences.

Altogether five Co-Production Labs were started in July 2019, which focussed on different co-production approaches. Together they covered all four Co's, including co-commissioning, co-design, co-delivery and co-assessment of employment services, which provided a rich learning experience for *MainArbeit*.

Co-Production Lab 1: Co-commissioning 'employability budgets' with young jobseekers

This Lab aimed at identifying and testing co-commissioning approaches to enable front-line staff, in particular those with counselling responsibilities (called 'persönlicher Ansprechpartner') and service users to make joint decisions on the use of the employability budget. This is a budget of up to €500, which staff can use relatively independently to support the integration of service users into the job market. Typically, employability budgets are used for individual training measures (e.g. to obtain a driver's licence), reimbursement of commuting expenditures and individual support of the jobseekers (e.g. coaching, assistance with job placement, psycho-social counselling). Previously, staff used these individual budgets primarily for activities to improve the employability of their service users, based on their own professional decisions.

The staff members started to work intensively with three young service users (aged between 18 and 25 years) who were willing to participate voluntarily in the Co-Production Lab after being approached by the staff member to whom they had been allocated. At the same time, the staff involved made further offers to other service users to participate in order to gain experience with other target groups so that eventually a total of 14 service users were involved in this experimental phase. The Co-production Lab also involved partnership working between *MainArbeit* and the organisation *SofortAktiv KIZ Prowina GmbH*, which provided additional coaching to the job seekers involved. During 120 days the staff learnt to work with their service users in a more co-productive way and to help them to identify their own wishes and objectives towards integration into the labour market. At the end of the experimental phase, one participant had already reached the first milestone (practical training and a training certificate), while the other two champions had made positive achievements in the right direction.

Co-Production Lab 2: Co-design of a citizens' symposium on pensions

Offenbach Employment Agency not only deals with jobseekers but also with people without employment who are approaching pension age. However, often this target group is not aware of the steps which need to be taken in order to ensure that they receive their pension payments in a timely way. This Co-Production Lab aimed at informing this target group about the steps needed to apply for pension payments by co-designing a public information event with 'experts by experience'. At the same

time, the Lab aimed to raise staff awareness of the difficulties encountered by service users when applying for pension payments and in preparing for retirement in general.

During 120 days frontline staff worked with older service users close to pension age who were able to bring in their 'expert knowledge' to help design a public event on pension issues. This involved several meetings with the co-production champions. In a first step, the co-production champions filled out a diagnostic questionnaire supported by staff to identify what they need to know and how they would like to access information. At an early stage, the idea emerged of organising an information marketplace, and, at the same time, creating a citizen networking forum. Co-Production Lab members also agreed to 'start small' and to scale the initiative afterwards.

The event took place in October and was attended by ten citizens. They were provided with relevant information from *MainArbeit*. Other partner agencies involved briefed the participants on financial and labour law issues as well as on volunteering opportunities in Offenbach. A short presentation by one service user was particularly impressive, pointing out to other peers that they should prepare for retirement in good time and seek advice from *MainArbeit*. The feedback from customers who attended the event was positive.

Co-Production Lab 3: Co-designing service offers from the 'Luise 34' second-hand shop

This Co-Production Lab aimed at strengthening the employability of service users with complex issues who work in 'Luise 34', a Social Department Store (a second-hand shop) run by a third sector organisation offering work opportunities for employable adults. The basic idea of the Lab is to enable service users working in 'Luise 34' to make offers to other service users, according to their individual abilities.

Staff of *MainArbeit* and representatives of three third sector organisations first ran a diagnostic test to identify what service users wished to learn and what they could teach others. This was followed by a workshop where the survey results were analysed and offers were designed, based on the willingness expressed by service users to co-produce and the feasibility of the proposed service offers.

It quickly became apparent that not all actions could be implemented at the same time, so priorities had to be set. It was agreed that the greatest need for creation of a new self-help group called "Louise is listening". Three participants were willing to help run this self-help group, but then unfortunately had to drop out for personal reasons. It was agreed, however, that the group would be re-established at a later date.

The Co-Production Lab therefore changed tack, deciding to start "digital training" for service users by service users. In particular, one service user with digital skills was willing to deliver a course unit for a small group. It was agreed that the service user would be supported by a staff member and that IT equipment and premises of the third sector organisation could be used for this purpose. Although the first course had to be postponed for health reasons, the participant was still keen to run the course later.

Co-Production Lab 4: Co-delivering peer support for and with people seeking a job

The Lab tested innovative ways of enabling service users to help each other to improve their employability through peer support tandems. The 'MainPate-DeinPate' initiative emerged from the idea of a staff member and was systematically developed further through an iterative process.

The six *MainArbeit* staff involved in this Lab worked intensively to match six service users in pairs on a 'capabilities and support need' analysis. The resulting peer support tandems each included one younger jobseeker under 25 years and an older jobseeker aged over 25. Each of the six staff members was available as contact person for the three peer support tandems during the experimentation phase.

The service users who engaged as co-production champions were encouraged to meet weekly, followed by meetings with front-line staff to assess progress made. In each meeting with front-line staff milestones were identified and tasks were agreed to be tackled by the tandems for the next 'milestone meeting'.

At the end of the experimentation period there was evidence that the self-efficacy of the peers had increased. All six co-production champions had either found employment with full insurance and pension rights or a placement for vocational training.

Co-Production Lab 5: Co-assessing training courses and other projects with participants

This Co-Production Lab involved experimentation with co-assessment approaches. The objective was to enable service users to identify which personal outcomes are important to them and to get their feedback on training courses and other projects offered by the Employment Agency. Co-assessment should go beyond the usual satisfaction surveys based on questionnaires by supporting participants to determine what is important to them and to make suggestions for improvement.

At the start of the experimentation process, the participants of a German course and a few participants of some further training courses were invited to an informal kick-off workshop in a social café, facilitated by *Governance International*. Some of the participants expressed the wish to create further networking opportunities with Germans outside the German course. It became apparent that more confidence-building measures were necessary in order to undertake a meaningful co-assessment.

Therefore staff engaged further with the co-production champions, connecting with them in (non-verbal) activities such as sport, physical exercises and other fun activities in order to build trust before the evaluation workshop. This "fun element" proved to be very effective. The workshop itself was very inter-active. The participants were first given the opportunity to determine what was important to

them about the training programmes before they determined what they liked or disliked about the programmes and what they lacked. Finally, the individual proposals were evaluated by all participants, sticking self-adhesive dots onto a poster with relevant evaluation criteria.

Most improvement suggestions have already been implemented, helping to tailor training programmes and other projects better to the needs of participants. The service users involved considered the workshop to be a positive experience. The staff members involved wish to continue these experimental approaches with participants from more training courses.

[back to the top](#) 

Obstacles

As part of the *Governance International* Workshops 4 and 5, participants were asked to identify which obstacles they had experienced and propose strategies for overcoming them. While some obstacles were specific to each Co-Production Lab, many participants identified the following common obstacles:

- It was difficult to recruit the first cohort of service users to take part in the Co-Production Labs. Some participants suggested working with the co-production champions to recruit more service users in the next phase of the project, as they are likely to be more persuasive and encouraging than staff members.
- The experimentation showed that vulnerable service users may not be able to make important contributions at times when they face crises, such as homelessness or financial debts – these crises often arose for external reasons but at times participants felt they were the result of sanctions imposed on jobseekers. This made it difficult, or sometimes impossible, for service users to focus on achieving positive development goals such as education.
- A number of staff members voiced concern about the additional time required for co-production in addition to their case load. While the experimentation phase was intense and time-limited, a number of participants asked for more support and resources for the scaling of co-production in *MainArbeit*. As a first step, a Co-Production Steering Group was set up to share lessons learnt and to keep up the momentum in Offenbach Employment Agency.

[back to the top](#) 

Outcomes

While some of the Co-Production Labs were able to achieve progress quickly, others experienced difficulties and had to redesign their action plans. This was often due to complex life issues affecting the co-production champions involved. Those Co-Production Labs which managed to test their co-production approach and collect initial evidence of improved outcomes were able to proceed to the development of prototypes. The Co-ordinators of those Labs which made less progress nevertheless opted to continue the experimentation – either with the initial groups of service users or with new groups of service users.

One Co-Production Lab in particular, the Lab working with peer support tandems ('MainPate-DeinPate') proved very effective in terms of improved outcomes. All six service users who volunteered to take part in the initiative were either placed in gainful employment or in vocational training. There is also anecdotal evidence of improved self-efficacy, as shown by quotes from the six peers participating in the Lab:

- "We have made friends."
- "It was a positive exchange of experiences among ourselves."
- "We experienced mutual motivation through emotional support."
- "We were able to develop new ideas and ways of doing things."
- "It was a lot of fun, because it was something different for a change."
- "The meetings of the whole project group gave us an additional exchange of experiences."
- "It was at last a way of communicating more trustingly with the *MainArbeit* staff."
- "Communication was eye-to-eye, the talks were more intense and we experienced more mutual understanding."
- "Due to the diversity of the different personalities of the Job Centre's advisors and associates, there was improved professional support for us."
- "We felt strengthened self-confidence through being expected to exercise personal responsibility."

Most importantly, in all Co-Production Labs there was intense action-learning, which was documented and disseminated within Offenbach Employment Agency. The experimentation process and results of the five Co-Production Labs were presented at a Co-Production Fest in November 2019 which was attended by staff of *MainArbeit* and involved third sector organisations as well as representatives of Government Departments in order to value the commitment of the co-production champions and at the same time to discuss together how to build on the experience of the Co-Production Labs.

[back to the top](#) 

Costs and savings

The Co-Production Labs did not involve any extra direct costs as they were an integral part of the *Governance International* Co-Production Star Training Programme. There

were some minor costs related to room hire and catering in a local social café where many of the Lab meetings with engaged service users took place.

It is evident that the main costs were additional staff time required during the experimentation phase. The top managers of *MainArbeit* took account of the additional workload of the two Co-ordinators of each Lab by reallocating workloads. Some staff members even engaged in more than one Co-Production Lab and worked intensely with the participating service users. Some Labs also developed ideas on how to reduce costs in terms of staff time in future experimentation. In particular, the team working on the peer support initiative 'MainPate-DeinPate' intends to make use of speed-dating methods to reduce the time involved in matching service users.

It is expected that the increased staff time involved will pay off in terms of increased efficiency. For example, when the services provided by *MainArbeit* are better tailored to the needs of service users there will be less wasted effort. In the medium-term effective peer support of job seekers may also reduce staff time needed for individual support to service users.

In the Workshops following the Co-Production Labs the participants learnt to identify priority outcomes and pathways to outcomes for each co-production initiative and to undertake an initial assessment. It is planned to undertake more assessment in the next phases of the co-production initiatives.

[back to the top](#) 

Lessons learnt and next steps

The commitment of the staff and service users involved in the Co-Production Labs was impressive. The presentations of all five Labs at a public event in November 2019 showed that all Labs had been successful in the sense that all participants had learned how to put the co-production tools and methods introduced in the co-production workshops into practice and to test new co-production approaches in their work areas.

Participants agreed that it would be important to keep up the momentum and to scale the experimentation with existing co-production approaches but also to encourage other innovative co-production initiatives, where suitable. In order to coordinate the various initiatives effectively, while keeping them flexible, a small coordinating team was set up which includes staff involved in the initial Co-Production Labs and which also involves the CEO and Deputy of Offenbach Employment Agency.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic caused a degree of interruption to the co-production process, some Lab teams used this time for further reflection and networking. Moreover, by August 2020, co-production has been adopted as a strategic tool to develop further the services of *MainArbeit*. It has been decided, that each year at least three new Labs should be established on relevant issues. Among these will be a Lab to improve the support of clients with housing problems. The digitalisation of services, which is already advanced at *MainArbeit*, will be another thematic focus of future Labs. The management of *MainArbeit* is promoting co-production as a way to make the organisation more agile and effective.

[back to the top](#) 

Further information

Website of the Offenbach Employment Agency (*MainArbeit* – Kommunales Jobcenter Offenbach), <https://www.mainarbeit-offenbach.de/>

Neseli, A. and Herpich, C. (2020), Co-production in the Offenbach Employment Agency: Job seekers providing peer support for each other. Governance International Case Study. *MainArbeit* and *Governance International: Offenbach and Birmingham*, <https://www.govint.org/good-practice/case-studies/co-production-in-the-offenbach-employment-agency-job-seekers-providing-peer-support-for-each-other/>

[back to the top](#) 