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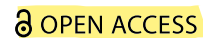
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# Ambivalence in digital social work: giving advice about welfare-to-work programmes to unemployed clients

Liv Bente Schellenberg Strømhaug and Kristin Halvorsen

Department of Language and Literature, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway

**ABSTRACT**

In contemporary welfare systems, employability-oriented approaches and welfare-to-work (WtW) programmes place activation and client responsibility at the heart of social services. WtW is a frequently discussed topic in frontline workers' interaction with unemployed clients; however, it also represents a source of ambivalence. With the increased digitalization of social work, counselling related to WtW often take place on digital platforms instead of face-to-face meetings. This study examines written interaction between counsellors and unemployed clients and analyses sequences in which the counsellors present WtW-related advice. A discourse analytic approach was adopted, focusing on the sequential design and framing of the advice. Three recurring advice-giving formats were identified: information as advice, interrogative advice, and assessment as advice. The three formats differ sequentially, in terms of normative pressure to respond and comply, but generally approach the topic of WtW participation cautiously and frame the decision as clients' autonomous choice, frequently presupposing a high level of institutional knowledge. Clients tend to be reluctant to respond to WTW advice, which impedes counsellors' ability to tailor the advice. The advice-giving sequences are short with few message turns, limiting the shared exploration of alternatives and potentially clients' active participation in decision-making. The study sheds light on the interactional challenges of addressing the potentially ambivalent topic of WtW in a digital counselling context but also raises questions regarding the realization of welfare policies through digital frontline work.

## Introduction

Welfare-to-work (WtW) programmes are a key feature of contemporary welfare systems centred around the employability approach of active labour market policies (Lodemel et al. 2014). Such programmes include measures such as vocational training, job search assistance, wage subsidies, and various programmes to increase individuals' chances of returning to work after periods of unemployment or work absence due to health or social barriers (Gjersøe 2016). In many cases, client participation in WtW programmes is a requirement and eligibility condition for minimum income benefits. This issue has been found to be a source of ambivalence in client – counsellor encounters (Olsen 2022). Olsen (2022) describes programmes such as work training as a 'grey compromise' that might buffer against the risk of losing benefits but that also risks further

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

distancing clients from ordinary employment (see, for example, operation and Development 2018, for an evaluation of youth work training).

Frontline workers in the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) are responsible for implementing activation policies and enrolling unemployed clients in relevant WtW programmes to bring them closer to labour market participation. However, social work practices in this context are changing as service digitalization develops. Technological innovations provide new opportunities for counsellors and clients (Peláez and Marcuello-Servós 2018; Nordesjö, Scaramuzzino, and Ulmestig 2022), and in NAV, client interaction is increasingly taking place on digital platforms. Frontline workers are expected to reach the institutional goals of activation-oriented counselling more efficiently using digital services and follow up through written interaction. This shift away from traditional face-to-face social work challenges frontline workers' established knowledge and skills, and a significant knowledge gap exists regarding the consequences for welfare service provision and welfare policy implementation.

The digitalization of services might be seen as extending client involvement policies in European labour and welfare systems (Andreassen 2019), as resourceful clients can retrieve comprehensive information online and strengthen their involvement in their own cases through self-service and improved access to counselling on digital platforms (Breit et al. 2021; Hansen, Lundberg, and Syltevik 2018). For counsellors, the digital platform provides a temporal space to produce answers with information before responding to the client; however, digital access has also increased the demand for services, adding work pressure (Løberg 2021). There are concerns the digitalization of social work might lead to the social exclusion of vulnerable clients who might lack access or skills to self-navigate online and benefit from these innovations (Fugletveit and Lofthus 2021; Schou and Pors 2019; Zhu and Andersen 2021). Traditional social work values, oriented towards relational dimensions and ideals of client involvement, might be under pressure, risking a fragmented perspective of the individual client case (Hansen, Lundberg, and Syltevik 2018; Løberg 2021; Mishna et al. 2012; van de Luitgaarden and van der Tier 2018).

In 2017, NAV implemented a digital platform called the *Activity Plan*, which contributed to the activation policy's achievement by requiring every client to have a digital plan specifying and documenting their WtW activities. Each plan is made in collaboration with their counsellor, as a requirement for receiving financial benefits. The system is also a control and documentation tool for management to monitor the number of clients and their registered activities at the local and national levels. The Activity Plan allows clients and their designated counsellors to register work-related activities and interact with each other in writing on a secure platform through a personal login. The interaction is asynchronous, resembling an email system, but also constitutes short, informal messages resembling chat or text messages.

In this article, we explore client – counsellor interaction as it unfolds in written message exchanges on the Activity Plan. We study the patterns of advice-giving specifically related to WtW programmes, aiming to shed light on how this potentially sensitive topic is managed on a digital platform. Using a discourse analytic approach, we study the sequential design and framing of advice in counsellor messages in sequences of interaction in which the topic is future WtW attendance. Three patterns of advice-giving are identified, and their opportunities for client involvement and informed decision-making are explored. The findings are discussed in light of the complexity of advice-giving in social work, the sensitivity of the topic of WtW, and the digital, written format.

## The ambivalence of welfare-to-work programmes

For frontline workers in labour and welfare offices, the topic of WtW programmes might be a source of ambivalence in client encounters. Olsen (2022) found ambivalence is especially prominent in interaction when activation options are discussed. For clients, WtW programmes might represent a solution that underscores their failure to hold or acquire ordinary work and

potentially also a social stigma, as their income depends on their compliance and participation. For counsellors, programmes like work training might constitute a compromise when clients express reluctance to enter ordinary work (for example, due to low coping beliefs), but they might also express ambivalence towards specific job opportunities to protect clients against high labour market demands and potential failure. Counsellors have also reported some pressure to keep clients in programmes motivated by management and institutional signals rather than clients' actual needs (Åsheim 2018, 2019). With the expectation that programmes will strengthen clients' ability to obtain work, counsellors are measured by the number of clients in their portfolios attending work programmes. When a client is signed into a programme, the institutional goal of activation is met, and the counsellor can focus on other clients.

In interaction with clients, advice on this topic can be particularly challenging, as the decision to participate in a programme needs to be negotiated in the possible tension between the counsellor's obligation to achieve activation and the client's autonomy, motivation, and experienced needs. Interviews with counsellors have illustrated activation work's relational aspects and the tensions between disciplinary or coercive methods for achieving client compliance and persuasive trust-building strategies that encourage client participation (Hagelund 2016; Senghaas, Freier, and Kupka 2019; Raeymaeckers and Dierckx 2013; van Berkel 2020). In this study, we explore how counsellors advise clients on joining a WtW programme within the digital context of the Activity Plan. This may also illuminate the challenges counsellors face in providing services through written interaction.

## Advice-giving in institutional interaction

In their seminal work on advice delivery from health visitors to new mothers, Heritage and Sefi (1992) defined advice-giving as taking place when someone '*describes, recommends or otherwise forwards a preferred course of future action*' (p. 368). They understand advice-giving as an act that can influence others' future actions. Subsequently, researchers have discussed the distinction between advice as a prescribed course of action and the provision of information, with the latter leaving decision-making to the client. However, in many empirical contexts, this distinction is blurred, since a preferred course of action might not be explicitly stated or recommended but implied by the professional (Hall and Slembrouck 2014).

Silverman (1997) identified 'the advice-as-information sequence' (p. 154ff), wherein the counsellor speaks in an information-delivery format, often in a general and non-personalized manner requiring only a minimal response from the client and saving time for the counsellor. Keeping in mind the counsellor's institutional authority, the client may perceive information about a specific course of action as advice. Silverman (1997) also illustrated implied advice in sequences in which the advice was camouflaged in questions about the other's disposition. A similar strategy is described by Butler et al. (2010) as 'advice-implicative interrogatives'. Questioning sequences may establish particular future actions as normatively relevant and thereby function as advice. In Spicker's (1990) words: 'In most professions, advice takes the form of a clarification of alternatives and predictions as to possible consequences' (p. 226). In this study, we lean on Heritage and Sefi's (1992) deliberately broad description, which allows us to treat what counts as advice as an empirical question (Pilnick 1999).

The epistemic asymmetry and normative nature of advice-giving (Heritage and Sefi 1992) is a defining dimension that represents certain interactional challenges for professionals, particularly in helping professions (Graf, Sator, and Spranz-Fogasy 2014). When one person acts as an adviser, the other is positioned as the receiver of advice and, hence, is less knowledgeable about the current topic. The normative presentation of something as normal, standard, or preferable can also weaken the receiver's position by communicating the expectation that the receiver will align with the advice provided. This makes advice-giving a potentially face-threatening action and might impose on the autonomy of the advice receiver. The ideal of non-directiveness in expert – lay interaction is

prevalent, and within some counselling contexts, advice-giving is considered a barrier to client empowerment, and counsellors may be instructed to avoid it (Hall & Slembrouck,2014). However, advice-giving is an inevitable feature of social work and part of an established norm in client interactions (Hall and Slembrouck 2014), where clients expect and seek advice within an unfamiliar institutional system.

Interactional delivery and reception of advice have been topics in discourse research within several empirical contexts, with an emphasis on health and therapeutic contexts, such as HIV counselling (Kinnell and Maynard 1996), pharmacy interactions (Pilnick 1999), telephone helplines (Butler et al. 2010), doctor – patient interactions (Toerien, Shaw, and Reuber 2013) and therapy (Emmison, Butler, and Danby 2011). In the social work context, advice-giving has been discussed as an integral feature of counselling (Hall & Slembrouck, 2014), but few empirical studies have analysed advice-giving practices. However, several studies on client – counsellor interaction may provide insights into the interactional accomplishment of initiating talk about future actions.

Danneris and Dall (2017) described the delicate process of assisting clients in expressing their perspectives in interaction and facilitating participation in decision-making. Caswell (2020) highlighted the importance of timing in interaction and the risk of presenting advice prematurely when discussing the future. Both studies emphasize counsellor interactional skills and the need to align with client capabilities and needs. Suoninen and Jokinen (2005) identified how social workers often use persuasive questioning that provide space for the clients' voices but simultaneously lead clients towards the 'correct' answer or choice. This can reflect Silverman's (1997) 'personalized advice following an interview format', in which the counsellor's questions build on the elements in the client's response that align with the counsellor's preferred direction.

Advice-giving in digital settings remains largely unexplored. Most studies concern social media and mundane online interaction, such as Internet forums and online support groups, in which non-professionals give or seek each other's advice (Harrison and Barlow 2009; Kouper 2010; Smithson et al. 2011; Stommel and Lamerichs 2014; Vayreda and Antaki 2009; Vepsäläinen 2022). The relevance of these studies is limited in the digital social work context, in which institutional roles and responsibilities play a crucial role.

## Materials and methods

This study was part of a larger project on digital counselling in NAV. Our data comprise 70 digital counsellor – client dialogues from between August 2019 and November 2020.[1] The participating clients were all unemployed and between 26 and 67 years old, with varied backgrounds and barriers to employment, from a lack of formal qualifications to health and social issues. They were in different phases of their trajectory with NAV services but were all defined by NAV as in need of an Activity Plan and close follow-up. They were each assigned a counsellor to help them find measures to strengthen their returning-to-work possibilities. Within the larger dataset, 34 sequences from 21 dialogues featuring the topic of future attendance in WtW programmes were identified.

A discourse analytic approach was applied to the data in which the sequentiality of the written messages was considered relevant to analysis. We viewed this data as institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage 1992) rather than simply as texts, that is a form of 'written speech' (Maynor 1994) in which a variety of communicative activities occur. This implies each message is studied and interpreted considering its placement in a local, sequential message context, as a response to a preceding message, or as an initiative that provides context for the next message. In the analysis, the framing of WtW-related advice was explored in counsellors' messages. This allowed us to capture how the participants made their situational interpretation, with associated participant roles and responsibilities, available to one another and negotiated their intersubjective understanding of the given communicative activity (Tannen 1993). The premise of the analysis is that the counsellor's various framing of WtW advice provides clients a participation framework that embeds expectations regarding action and responsibility. Three recurring frames for advice-giving were identified,

capturing variations in counsellors' approaches to the topic of WtW programmes. These are not intended to comprise a complete list but illustrate the variation in how formats and framing of written advice-giving might provide different levels of engagement with clients; written counselling with other client groups or welfare topics may reveal other practices. The subsequent excerpts are examples of patterns in the larger dataset.

## Results: advice-giving practices

The following analysis demonstrates the three recurring advice-giving practices identified in the data, which illustrate various degrees of client engagement and available participant frameworks. These practices range from implicit to explicit advice and are categorized as: *information as advice, interrogative advice*, and *advice with professional assessment*. As a general observation, the WTW sequences are relatively short in terms of the number of messages from participants, but the interaction tends to stretch over time. This is partly because of a lack of or delayed response from clients but also a relative absence of follow-up or enquiry into the clients' reception of counsellor messages.

### Information as advice

The first practice identified is *information as advice*, described by Silverman (1997) as an information-delivery design which can be considered advice, given the encounter's institutional nature and the counsellor's role in supporting future action, often in a general, non-personalized form. The counselling encounter and counsellors' institutional authority carry an expectation that the client will consider the provided information relevant to their decision. In their information delivery, they generally presented one selected programme or action, not all possible options, implying that a professional assessment has been made regarding the relevance of the mentioned programme. Providing information in this manner can constitute an advice-implicative action (Shaw, Potter, and Hepburn 2015).

#### Extract 1 (B8–1): just want to inform you

The first extract illustrates how a counsellor provides information about a specific programme and invites the client to consider its relevance but without explaining the initiative. Prior to this message, the client, counsellor, and general practitioner met to discuss health issues and further treatment plans. One month later, the counsellor initiated the topic of work programmes with the following message:

> Co:  Hi [name]
>      Just want to inform you about this offer. Of course, you need to consider whether it would be feasible in view of your health and so on, but I just wanted to inform you in any case!
>      https://[programme web address]
>      Regards, [name]
>      (End of dialogue)
>
>      The client did not reply to this message; after three days, the counsellor started another thematic thread, changing the topic to health treatment and financial benefits.

The counsellor opens with a meta-comment about the message intention, presented in an elliptical form familiarly used in text messages ('just want to inform you'), highlighting the status of the message as relatively casual. Before providing the actual information in a webpage link at the end of the message, the counsellor further downgrades the advice's seriousness by including repeated hedges such as 'just' and 'in any case', emphasizing the client's epistemic authority related to their overall situation ('Of course you need to consider . . . '). The link to the programme information is

added without any description of or justification for why this particular programme might be relevant, leaving the information-gathering, assessment, and decision processes to the client alone. In this instance, the client did not respond to the message, and the WtW topic was abandoned.

This is also the most frequent response type to information as advice: an absence of a response or a reply that bypasses the WtW topic. The absence of uptake markers such as 'I understand' or 'what do you mean?' has been described by Heritage and Sefi (1992) as a strong implication of advice resistance; here, the client might simply consider the proposal irrelevant or unattractive. Pomerantz (1984) points to the normative structure of 'informings' as a first part to an adjacency pair in which assessment is the conditionally relevant second part. Counsellors might orient towards this sequential implicativeness in their messages, while clients do not. There are few explicit attempts to elicit clients' assessments of the offer and few indications a response is expected in these cases. This can be seen as a highly implicit form of advice-giving, leaving the responsibility for future action to the client.

### Extract 2 (C4): but I can offer you job club

Extract 2 shows a similar approach, as the counsellor informs the client about the programme with a website link without providing details or background for this choice. The client had been registered as unemployed and undergone a mapping process which resulted in being assigned to this new counsellor. In this case, the information is taken as advice, as the client rejected the idea. The counsellor writes:

Co: Hi,
I am your counsellor for work-oriented follow-up now that you've completed the mapping. [Three sentences regarding registering activities in the Activity Plan were removed.]
I'm thinking you'll now search for a job on your own, but I can offer you job club if you want. Attaching a link here. https://[programme web address].
We can also talk about possible work programmes if you don't get a job offer. I see you have also applied for unemployment benefits. Just contact me here if you have any questions.
Greetings [name]

Cl: [Two days later]
Hi, thanks for the information. Will add to the activity plan then as I apply for jobs. Thinking that job club is not so relevant now, as I have a good overview of what needs to be done to increase the chances for a job. [Two sentences about an educational class they were taking were removed.]

The counsellor answers the same day 'It's all right' and continues focusing on the Activity Plan and job applications.

Information about the WtW programme *Job Club* and others is introduced here as secondary to other information and activities, framed by a future scenario in which the client works independently to find a job ('I'm thinking you'll now search for a job on your own'). The sequential placement of the topic suggests work programmes are not the preferred course of action. The choice to join a WtW programme is presented as conditional on the client's success in their independent job search ('if you don't get a job') or their hypothetical future wish to join the programme ('if you want to'). Work programme information was provided through a web link, along with a general invitation to talk later but without further explanation, leaving the client to independently explore the programme.

Extracts 1 and 2 both illustrate the framing of the advising situation as one in which the client is autonomous and resourceful, having epistemic authority over their own situation. Counsellors assume the facilitator role, guiding clients towards potentially relevant institutional information. The implicit WtW advice is framed as an offer the client might consider should their situation allow or should they find it relevant. This reduces the inherent

asymmetry involved in advice-giving (Silverman 1997) while also leaving the responsibility for acquiring, assessing, and deciding on the information provided to the client.

### Interrogative advice

The second identified practice involves advice presented in a questioning format that not only encourages clients' assessment but also explicitly elicits this assessment. In contrast to the general and conditional invitation, (e.g. Extract 2 'just contact me if you have any questions'), the counsellors here present advice in an interrogative form, thus providing a sequential space in which the client is normatively expected to provide the second part of the adjacency pair (Sacks et al., 1974). Similar questioning formats have been described as 'advice-implicative interrogatives' (Butler et al. 2010), in which professionals' allusion to a specific possible future action identifies that action as normatively relevant. This can be seen as an interactional specification of client-centred support in a context in which the provision of explicit advice is potentially sensitive.

### Extract 3 (D5): could work training be relevant for you if . . . ?

Extract 3 demonstrates how the counsellor initiates the WtW topic in a questioning format. Similar to information design, WtW is introduced in a non-personalized manner without detail or explanation, but the questioning form prompts a client response. The first and main parts of the message reports are from an office meeting in which possible job opportunities are discussed. After concluding further job-searching measures, the counsellor initiates the topic of work training:

Co: [Six sentences about the meeting were removed, which resulted in the client's CV being sent to an employer.]
I'm still keeping an eye on positions registered directly. Could work training be relevant for you if there's a job possibility?
Regards, [name]

Cl: (Four days later)
[Five sentences about the meetings and job applications were removed.]
It would be really fun if something did come out of the job that was mentioned, so I'm crossing fingers for that. What do you mean by work training?
Best regards, [name]

The counsellor's reply comments on the job mentioned by the client and repeats her question about work training without providing further explanation. The client did not reply to this second repeated question, and the topic of work training was not pursued through digital dialogue.

The counsellor presents the opportunity of work training as a question that elicits the clients' assessment. As with information as advice, the relevance of the WtW topic remains implicit. There is no justification or description to encourage the client to explore this option nor details regarding programme commitments or benefits. The questioning format generates a client response, but in a simple format that calls for an explanation ('What do you mean by work training?'). This format frames the client as knowledgeable and presupposes they are capable of assessing the proposal and deciding to join. The client's response indicates she lacked the necessary knowledge to decide. The counsellor's question came at the very end of the message as an appended topic, a structure mirrored in the client's message. We included this brief example to illustrate a recurrent tendency in the data of counsellors overestimating clients' institutional insights. In Extract 4, the counsellor provides more information that orients towards the client's specific situation.

### *Extract 4 (E1–2): would you like to participate in a work programme called job club?*

This an example of the counsellor providing advice about Job Club and, in this case, some additional information is offered with minimal reference to the programme's relevance for the client. The client had sent a message to the counsellor about a job rejection and sharing her concern about very few vacant positions. She was also worried her allowance was about to run out. The counsellor replies:

Co: Hi [name]
  Too bad with the job. Maybe you did nothing wrong, but there were many good applicants.
  You'll receive work assessment allowance as a jobseeker until 20 July.
  [Ten lines about COVID-19 rules and financial support from NAV were removed.]
  Would you like to participate in a work programme called job club? It's about job searching and the like.
  You can read more here: https://www.nav.no/[address].
  The course is digital in these corona times, but maybe it can give you some tips when job searching. I'll check what directly registered positions we've received and whether any may be relevant to you.
  Regards, [name]

  (Three hours later)
Cl: To be completely honest, I don't know if a job club will make any difference to my applications/interviews. I've studied management and personnel work where much of this was a topic, have acquaintances who've gone through it, so I know what it's about. Have also been on a job search course before, but not through Nav.
  The career counsellor I was with also said I did everything right, but there are crazy amount of applicants to about everything I apply for, and I have a gap in my CV. Then maybe think it will be a wasted resource for them and that others need it more.
  In relation to my condition, you may need a new doctor's statement in case of worsening/relapse? Did you get any clarity in this?
  [name]

  The counsellor replied after three days, confirming it seemed reasonable for the client to not attend Job Club.

The counsellor opened her message with encouraging remarks about the job rejection and then addressed the matter of financial benefits. Following the provision of practical information, the counsellor introduces the WtW topic through a question that can be read as an offer ('would you like to participate in . . . '). Here, the counsellor does not presuppose prior programme knowledge but adds a brief yet unspecific description ('It's about job searching and the like') and a link to additional information. Then follows a statement providing both an excuse ('the course is digital') and a mild justification for attending ('maybe it can give you some tips'). Again, the WtW programme is introduced in a mitigating and non-directive manner, and the interrogative advice format invites the client to assess and respond while leaving the decision to learn more about the programme to the client. As in the previous examples, the question about WtW is framed as secondary to other topics and placed towards the end of the message as an appended topic.

In contrast to the persuasive nature of social work questioning found in Suoninen and Jokinen (2005), WtW-related questioning in this digital context does not seem to represent a normative preference for accepting the proposal. Unlike the information design, interrogative advice generates a client response, but it is more often a rejection than an acceptance of the proposal to attend a programme. In this case, the client politely rejects the proposal ('To be completely honest . . . '). The client provides detailed reasoning for this rejection, which the counsellor subsequently accepts, and the topic is dropped.

Additionally, contrary to the information design, the questioning format places a certain normative pressure on the client to provide a response; however, as the responses are frequently rejections, the preference to comply does not seem to guide clients in these cases. Counsellors rarely pursue rejection messages, and they rarely provide additional information or challenge clients' reasons for declining. Clients' epistemic authority and autonomy are also co-produced in these advice practices, with normative pressure primarily related to participating in interaction with the counsellor.

### Assessment as advice

The third advice-giving practice is reflected in messages in which counsellors provide professional assessments when initiating the WtW topic. In such cases, the preferred course of action is presented more explicitly. By offering an assessment and recommending future actions, the adviser's epistemic authority is highlighted, and a certain normative pressure is put on the advisee to acknowledge and comply (Shaw, Potter, and Hepburn 2015). As with interrogatives, assessments provide a sequential space in which a response is relevant and a second assessment (Pomerantz 1984). However, the pressures to comply are related to NAV's institutional context, in which counsellors not only hold institutional knowledge but also authority regarding decisions and sanctioning, for example, related to clients' basic income.

### Extract 5 (B7): it would be very appropriate for you

This example illustrates more explicitly formulated advice from the counsellor based on her professional assessment. The counsellor asked NAV's advising doctor to evaluate documentation related to granting permanent disability benefits. This was declined by the doctor, and the counsellor initiated a WtW programme in which the client's work ability was further assessed. The counsellor started a new thread to report back to the client.

Co: Hello. I've now had a reply to my inquiry to [NAV's advising doctor]. At this stage, the documentation is not complete enough for considering an application for disability benefit. As I consider this, it would be highly appropriate to go through with the work assessment programme we talked about. Before I make the referral, I would very much like to get a confirmation from you that it's still OK for me to refer you.
  Regards, [name]

Cl: (41 minutes later)
  Hello. As I see it, it is necessary and there are no other options, so even if it makes it difficult for me, I realize that I have to. Will it be possible to get any of it done by phone? Going there in person and social interaction are difficult for me, a lot because of anxiety, but also [name of diagnosis] that flares up when I have to meet people. Especially in this situation where someone's going to 'analyse' me.
  When will this programme start? I've actually been planning to travel to [name of place] now in July/August.

  The counsellor replied 26 minutes later, reassuring the client the programme can be tailored to individual needs.

The counsellor begins by reporting the advising doctor has made a decision. The results are presented as a factual state of affairs (incomplete documentation) without detailing what the current documentation is missing. The counsellor then presents an assessment of the preferred course of action – participating in a work assessment programme. The advice is presented forcefully and boosted ('highly appropriate') and as being from the perspective of institutional insight ('as I consider it'). The professional advice is clear, and she refers to a previous relevant meeting ('as we talked about'); the client's final assessment is invited to confirm this choice of action. Presented with this option, the client responds with reluctant acceptance ('I realize that I have to'), conceding no other options exist. This assessment suggests she received the necessary information to make the decision. The adviser's assessment and explicit advice might function as decision support for the client, which also clarifies his/her situation and options in a complex institutional system.

### Extract 6 (F5–2): you're free to choose, but . . .

In this final extract, the counsellor advises on participating in a WtW programme by highlighting the consequences of the contrary. This is a repetitive approach in our material,

especially when clients resist counsellor advice or withdraw from previous attendance agreements. Here, the counsellor and client had a face-to-face meeting and agreed to apply to a work programme. The counsellor sent a message the same day, asking the client to describe her programme needs so these can be added to the application. The client responded the following day.

Cl: Hi, I must again thank you so much for the conversation.
I choose to find relevant work training without assistance from NAV.
Best regards [name]

Co: (The next morning)
Hi [name]
What you mean is you don't want me to register you for the work assessment programme after all? If you still want NAV to be of assistance and provide you with follow-up, you on your part may need to participate in a programme that works closely with you to help you get a job. It's true you're free to choose to find relevant job training yourself, but then there is a risk the benefits you're getting from NAV will stop because you don't meet the conditions for receiving a work assessment allowance.
Best regards, [name]

Cl: (Two hours and 40 minutes later)
I can try the programme, but I'm probably not quite ready for a job yet. Then I want alternative no. 1, guidance in relation to work training.
Best regards [name]

The counsellor confirmed an hour later that the client will be applied to a programme.

The client's withdrawal from the plan to attend the programme was not explained or justified. In response, the counsellor asks for clarification by reformulating what the client wrote, which can be read as a dispreferred response ('What you mean is ... ') (Pomerantz 1984). She then continues to present programme participation as a condition for future assistance from NAV ('if you still want ... '). The condition is mitigated ('you may need to') but is expanded in the following sentence, which presents the risk of not meeting the requirements for benefits. While she acknowledges the client can find job training independently, she also highlights the risk of losing benefits. The counsellor provides what might be described as a show concession (Antaki and Wetherell 1999), admitting the client has certain agency ('It's true that you are free to choose ... '), but with the consequence of possibly losing financial support.

The counsellor does not explore the client's changing circumstances since the previous day nor what alternatives exist for the client to meet benefit requirements. The resulting assessment might function as a threat and strong normative pressure to comply with the advice. There might be underlying reasons why the counsellor finds it appropriate to pressure the client, for example, if the client has been evasive or reluctant to collaborate on work-related activities. However, the presentation of consequences here is a form of advice that leaves few opportunities for the client to participate in decision-making. The client also responds by accepting but with the reservation that she might not be ready to start working.

Both examples of advice assessment show how advice in an assessment format provides an interactional expectation to respond as well as normative pressure to comply with counsellor advice. In both examples, institutional regulations and expectations were described to clients and provided as justification for advice. Although representing normative pressure to comply, this also provides clients with crucial information that might support their decision-making (e.g. how to receive desired benefits).

## Discussion

WtW programmes are a potentially sensitive topic in client – counsellor interaction. The current study illustrates the interactional work counsellors perform when addressing this topic in the context of the digital Activity Plan. The three advice-giving practices show the cautiousness with which this topic is managed, and most examples show care is taken not to persuade or pressure clients towards a specific decision. The three formats function differently both sequentially (in terms of normative pressure to respond and comply) and with respect to epistemic positioning, but all frame the decision concerning WtW as clients' autonomous choice, varyingly providing institutionally relevant information as decision support. The general absence of explanations and justifications from counsellors contributes to framing clients as knowledgeable and independent, giving them significant responsibility for acquiring and assessing complex institutional information.

The information as advice format acknowledges clients' epistemic authority and positions counsellors as simply identifying existing opportunities. Responsibility for future actions rests with clients, and it often remains unclear whether clients perceive proposals as relevant. The interrogative format creates the normative expectation that clients participate in the WtW assessment, and counsellors successfully elicit a response. Clients' epistemic authority is also foregrounded, and the WtW topic is often framed in a downgraded, conditional manner. Counsellors may presuppose clients have high institutional knowledge and thus not always provide them the necessary information to participate in programme-related decision-making. Raitakari et al. (2015) emphasize that information and decision support are crucial to prevent clients from simply providing information about themselves or reacting to the professional assessment.

Examples of counsellors providing professional assessments and explicit advice to clients include greater details of information and accounts tailored to the client situations. This both provides decision support to the client and increases normative pressure to comply, particularly when the negative consequences of rejecting the advice are highlighted. A certain level of institutional insight is required for clients to assess and resist counsellors' advice. However, sometimes strong normative pressure may be necessary in a system with more or less fixed pathways for clients, in which counsellors are bound by institutional, legal, and practical constraints. It may be difficult for clients to take an active part in their own cases (Olesen 2018), and decision support in the form of explicit and justified advice may aid decision-making.

In face-to-face interaction, the absence of advice uptake or explicit advice rejection might justifiably be pursued by counsellors; however, in this digital context, we found few examples of repeated or adjusted advice. When clients resist or reject a proposal, counsellors rarely pursue the topic. This might be interpreted as respecting client wishes but also as an absence of counselling. Clients might not recognize WtW's relevance for their situation as counsellors do and might not embrace autonomy in the job search process. However, when clients express reluctant or delayed responses, counsellors also inhibit their attempts to tailor advice and progress with clients' cases. This combination of relative resistance to advice and cautiousness in offering assessment risks obscuring the decision-making process.

Decision-making regarding WtW programme participation requires some collective involvement (Juhila et al. 2015) from both clients and counsellors for the decision to be client-centred and in accordance with institutional regulations. The interactional trajectories of advice-giving in our data were all relatively short, and the WtW topic was rarely explored for more than a few message turns. It is reasonable to question whether the digital format permits sufficient topic exploration or a shared assessment of existing alternatives. In this sense, digital counselling might affect client – counsellor collaboration, which in turn might reduce clients' opportunity to participate in informed decision-making.

The timing of advice-giving, as highlighted by Caswell (2020), including aligning advice with client capabilities, may be considerably more complex in a digital and written interactional format. Danneris (2018) described vulnerable welfare recipients' complex trajectories

through phases of progression, stagnation, deterioration, and derailment, which also illustrate the challenges counsellors face when attempting to align their advice with clients' specific situations. Client capabilities are not static but change over time in a complex, non-linear manner. The question is perhaps whether digital and written counselling provide counsellors with sufficient insights about the client to design and time their advice optimally. As counsellors experience increased demand for digital services (Løberg 2021), they also find new coping strategies (Breit et al. 2021) in the face of time pressures, performance indicators, and institutional preferences for guiding clients efficiently through the system and towards employment.

This study sheds light on the potentially ambivalent topic of WtW and how frontline workers manage tensions of activation policies in digital interaction with clients. How counsellors shape digital social work practices provides insight into the daily workings of our welfare system and illustrates the challenges of implementing welfare policies while supporting vulnerable clients. While the Activity Plan digital platform provides opportunities for efficient information exchange and clarification through message exchange, the question remains as to whether some sensitive or complex topics such as WtW programmes might prove challenging to manage in a digital context. Empirical studies on digital social work and the affordances of many new digital channels for communication are needed to understand how they might affect social work practices and client access to services.

## Note

1. The project was reviewed and supported by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data, as well as the NAV Legal Department and the NTNU Data Protection Officer. Following a review with Data Protection Impact Assessment, the participant consent requirement was waived. Data were collected, stored, and managed as per the guidelines for research ethics and the Personal Data Act, ensuring participant anonymity and data security and integrity.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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