

ISF Report 2013:9

## Dealing with sickness insurance

Role perceptions and attitudes  
towards laws and regulations among  
administrative officers at the  
Swedish Social Insurance Agency

Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate

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# Summary

The Swedish Social Insurance Inspectorate (Inspektionen för socialförsäkringen, ISF) is an independent supervisory agency for the Swedish social insurance system. The objectives of the agency are to strengthen compliance with legislation and other statutes, and to improve the efficiency of the social insurance system through system supervision and efficiency analysis and evaluation.

The ISF's work is mainly conducted on a project basis and is commissioned by the Government or initiated autonomously by the agency. This report has been initiated by the agency.

## *Background*

The administrative officers at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan) perform functions important to the public. Therefore, examining role perceptions and attitudes towards work conditions amongst the administrative officers is a relevant subject for study. The report is part of a project that examines the impact of the administrative officers with respect to actions taken by them to enable persons on sick leave to return to work, and with respect to the number of sick days taken.

## *Objectives*

The objective of the report is to study role perceptions and attitudes amongst administrative officers processing applications for sickness benefits and sickness compensation at the Swedish Social Insurance Agency. The report has two parts and two separate objectives. First, it investigates the attitudes and role perceptions of the administrative officers relating to their work conditions and public service values

and ethics, in general. Second, it studies attitudes towards the sickness insurance scheme that was reformed in 2008 (known as the rehabilitation chain), as well as administrative regulations and methods designed to enable people on sick leave to return to work.

### *Methods*

An on-line survey was conducted from March to June in 2012. The population of the survey included all the various types of administrative officers (i.e. personal administrative officers, administrative officers processing the applications at the beginning of the sickness period, and specialists who perform consultative tasks) who process applications for sickness benefits and sickness compensation. The target group consisted of 2,922 administrative officers. The response rate was 59 per cent.

### *Findings*

Evaluating the Swedish Social Insurance Agency positively co-varies with emphasis on different forms of administrative competence (skills and expertise) needed to work as an administrative officer. This is quite clear when it comes to managerial competence (delivery and result orientation). Positive evaluations of the responsibilities that relate to the Swedish Social Insurance Agency as an authority, on the one hand, and positive evaluations of those activities mainly directed towards the employees at the Agency, on the other hand, co-vary with attitudes that emphasise managerial competence as crucial in the work of an administrative officer.

Furthermore, the more negative evaluations of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency are, the more limited is the perception of bureaucratic discretion. In the report the lack of bureaucratic discretion is expressed through statements such as 'there is too much control', and 'I would prefer to be more independent in processing my cases'.

The report examines public service values (public service ethics) in their traditional and modern forms. Traditional ethics emphasizes traditional values about public administration, such as neutrality, impartiality, and impersonality, and seems to be quite easy for the administrators to comply with in their daily work. The modern ethos, however, which addresses the capacity to call attention to deficiencies or errors in the processing of cases and decision making, is viewed as

difficult to put into practice. The longer the administrative officers have been employed by the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, the more easily they apply these traditional and modern public service values in their work. Furthermore, the more the administrative officers feel they are part of their working environment, the more easily they are able to realize modern public service values.

### *Conclusions*

Three main conclusions are drawn based on the analyses in the second part of the report. First, an administrative officer's perceptions of limited bureaucratic discretion and perceived difficulties in putting public service values into practice in his or her work can explain the variation in attitudes towards the rehabilitation chain and towards different forms of written administrative guidance. Thus, the officers' perceived limited bureaucratic discretion, together with their perceptions of difficulties in realizing public service values in their daily work co-vary with negative attitudes to both the law (the rehabilitation chain) and administrative guidance. The report stresses that the public service values appear to be important in attitudes towards legislation and administrative guidance.

Second, two types of administrative competence are connected with attitudes towards the rehabilitation chain, written administrative guidance, methods of rehabilitation, and certainty about different concepts found in the sickness insurance scheme (the rehabilitation chain). The administrative officers' emphasis on managerial competence (delivery and result orientation) co-varies with the expression of positive attitudes towards the rehabilitation chain and written administrative guidance. Stressing boundary-spanning competence, on the other hand, can appear to be connected to expressing positive attitudes towards different methods of rehabilitation, and certainty about how to understand different concepts in the law. The boundary-spanning competence is manifested as an emphasis on the capacity to work across organizational borders, for example, working with other authorities such as Public Employment Service.

In the report, the emphasis on different forms of administrative competence is seen as important to the extent to which the administrative officers can accept the laws and regulations or see them as useful.

Third, the administrative officers' positive evaluation of the Swedish Social Insurance Agency is connected to positive attitudes towards the rehabilitation chain and written administrative guidance.