

The same things but in a different way: working as a justice assistant in times of corona

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And then things became completely different ... Suddenly it was there: the message that we had to prepare ourselves for working from home because of the spread of the corona virus. Appointments were cancelled – be it somewhat doubtful at first.

I hadn't expected it at that time. Let alone that it would last for such a long time. At that moment I just thought, "*Okay, let's do this*" – not aware of what was to come and what impact it would have. How could I have?

Suddenly we had to start organizing and reorganizing things to gain insight into our own current assignments, to keep in touch with our clients, with colleagues, with stakeholders and cooperation partners. Doing nothing wasn't - and still isn't - an option.

We had to look for new ways of working. We were facing the same assignments, but different. We received the same offers, but different. We needed to continue to work together, but in a different way. We shared the same goals as before, but had to work towards them in a different way.

Following the same road

The job of a justice assistant is to work at the basis. It is like moving stones in a river trying to make the water flow in a different way. The direction of the flow itself can never be changed – this is subject to the forces of nature, to the laws of history and to people's personal (dis)abilities.

We work with people specifically *within* their own living situation and context. Often we see them facing serious problems. We take up guidance, support them and hope to help them move towards a better life. We follow the same road as they do, we lead the way and we help them towards personal growth, self-insight and self-responsibility. We tackle problems and difficulties that arise, often together with (external) experts.

Conditions often provide a framework for the offender and we monitor how these are handled and complied with. By going out with people, talking to them and keeping in touch, we try to be alert on possible signs of relapse or recidivism. Just controlling people will never make a difference. Solid, and genuine, contact and communication are basic conditions for success, and are the core of our work.

Human contact

Also in corona times we keep in regular contact with our clients. We discuss the same as what we would have discussed in the office or during the home visits. People contact us with questions, difficulties or when they are in need for a conversation. Clients provide certificates and we report to the magistrates. This all has remained the same, but on the other hand has become very different.

We receive many questions – questions about how things should be done now or how the (changed) procedures are? Is solid and real human contact only - or mainly – possible in face-to-face meetings? Or could it be realized in other ways as well?

Sometimes people are asking for face-to-face contacts. They have the feeling that without these it is difficult to make clear what they really mean, or if they have been understood correctly. This is no different for us.

The corona times challenge us to contact people in different ways. There are no more non-verbal aspects. The same for observations during home visits – so much information can normally be found in those. We miss these details, we miss the 'room atmosphere' and we are trying our best (in vain?) to find it in the ways of contact that we are now able to make. We would really like to see people in person, especially when making important decisions or when giving out advices.

That is our biggest challenge, and our greatest uncertainty too. Can we keep in touch with the people, with their living situations and contexts? Are we (good) enough for our people? Being physically present feels familiar, feels real, simply because it is our human nature.

Is our contact of the same quality, even if different? Is it real? Is it decent enough? Is it human enough? It is enough? Can we be sufficiently adamant? Is our guidance of the same quality? Time will tell ...

You would expect certain contacts to have stopped or been interrupted. For some assignments this is indeed officially (formally) the case, but in practice we try not to allow it. We will keep in touch, that is for sure. We want to be persistent and to actively look for people whom we have difficulties to get in contact with. But in a different way.

We get used to making the best out of telephone conversations - with or without video - and we learn to work with it, because also in this way of communicating we can feel the connection. People are often grateful to hear us and appreciate the extra phone call to ask how things are going. There is a need for conversation and a need for emotional support and guidance. We also notice a different kind of connection with our clients during these times, a kind of general solidarity that is also felt in society: *"We stand together and we have to get through this together"*.

It's a different way of working, but we keep on going. We are learning and developing new skills in the current forms of contact and we see opportunities for efficiency, provided the fact that the basic condition of real, human and solid contact is there. Only then a cooperative relationship can be created to work together and to follow the same road. For all our assignments we look for the same (and therefore recognizable) quality in what we can offer to our clients.

Letting go

At the same time, this period is an exercise in learning to let go and to observe, to "live with less" – even though it sometimes feels contrary to our commitment, to our sense of responsibility and to the feeling that society is counting on us.

The work of a justice assistant always balances between (keeping) distance and (searching) proximity. Especially now.

It is also an exercise in trying to be satisfied with the situation as it is, and in learning to accept to not be able to do your work exactly in the way you would like and are used to. The same things must be done in a different way now.

There are also aspects that have improved. For example, we notice that there is more time and space for reporting. It is satisfying to use these reports for evaluation purposes as well (where are we and where are we going? Where do we come from?), instead of only for informing our clients.

Working from home is not something new. It has been established for quite some time and is also important for a good and healthy *work-life* balance. However combining working from home with the other tasks in one's life is surely a new aspect. We sometimes miss variety because the alternation between the various aspects of our work (client conversations at the desk, home visits, consultation with services and administrative tasks) is no longer there.

It is sometimes said that the most important thing is to not mingle your work with your home life. But how can this be done when working from home? Dealing with people who have been hurt brings a mental and emotional burden. We notice that colleagues react in a more emotional way, and have difficulties in putting matters aside. Exchanging ideas with colleagues is now less obvious as we do not meet in the office or during breaks at the coffee machine. "*Just knock the door*" is now impossible. Yet social support really matters, and that will not change.

Our possibilities lie within the - and our - limits. We do everything possible to carry out our assignments in a way that is consistent with our values and standards, also during corona.

We hope that it is (good) enough... while we do the same... but in a different way.

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