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# **THE USE OF LABOR MARKET SUPPLEMENTS BY THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT IN THE NETHERLANDS**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In the Netherlands, wage increases in the public sector have been systematically lower than those in the private sector throughout the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> This policy was based on a perceived need to reduce public expenditure and an assumption that public-sector wages exceeded private-sector wages. However, a comprehensive pay comparison per job level (Van der Hoek, 1989) concluded that the latter assumption only holds true for the two lowest job levels where public-sector wages exceed market-sector wages by approximately 4 percent. On higher job levels, public-sector pay appeared to be behind market-sector pay, implying that approximately two-thirds of government workers earn less than their private-sector counterparts. This gap amounts to 3 percent on level 3 and increases to 24 percent on the highest job level (Level 7).<sup>2</sup>

The apparent gap between public- and market-sector pay in the Netherlands is far from unique. In other countries, public-sector employees have also lost ground in relative average wage position to their private-sector counterparts (Elliot and Murphy, 1987; Oxley *et al.*, 1990; Wise, 1988). Despite this pay gap, there is no unambiguous and solid evidence that the recruitment of highly qualified personnel poses a general problem in the Netherlands. The turnover in high civil service positions does not exceed the average.<sup>3</sup> According to the Dutch Interior Minister, the public sector does not face such general bottlenecks as a demander in the labor market that structural measures are needed (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 1990b:1). Nonetheless, by the end of 1987 the Dutch government introduced two instruments of a so-called differential pay policy.

The first was retention bonuses. These are temporary bonuses that are paid once or several times a year on the condition that the

individual involved will stay in his or her job for a period of, in principle, at least three years. If he or she leaves within the designated period, the bonus must be refunded. The second was labor market allowances which are temporary additions that are paid monthly and increase the salary unconditionally.

In addition to the retention bonus and the labor-market allowances, other possibilities to credit employees with extra rewards already existed: bonuses, personal allowances, and extra annual increments. A minority of employees who are awarded an addition also enjoy extra rewards in another form: 15 percent in 1988 and 28 percent in 1989. However, most ministries set limitations on the accumulation of extra rewards, *e.g.*, in the form of a maximum percentage of the gross annual salary or a maximum absolute amount. Ministries tend to integrate the different arrangements, often in an attempt to link pay to performance.

Some personnel managers have the impression that retention bonuses and labor-market allowances pioneer a performance-based pay system. Yet these instruments were developed in order to counteract perceived bottlenecks in the supply of specific groups who are scarce and who can possibly earn more in the private sector. Four groups were centrally designated: accountants, automation experts, financial economists, and tax experts. In addition, agencies may apply the instruments to individuals outside these groups while agencies may also designate other groups eligible for either of the supplements.

An investigation into the application of these instruments in the central government sector was carried out in the Netherlands (*Stichting Het Nederlands Economisch Instituut*, 1990). In this article the author will mainly review the results of this study which is based on existing statistics, interviews with personnel managers of six ministries (both on the central level and on lower levels within these ministries) and a survey of 327 civil servants who received either a retention bonus or a labor market allowance.<sup>4</sup>

Table 1 compares the respondents with all government workers as to the division over the 18 salary scales that are used in the central government sector. It appears that respondents are somewhat over-represented in the upper salary scale, suggesting that the additions are mainly channelled to the higher grades and that ministries consider bottlenecks less perceptible in the lower grades which would be in line with the fact that the gap between public- and market-sector pay emerges in the higher salary scales.

TABLE 1  
DIVISION OF RESPONDENTS OVER SALARY SCALES,  
1988

Scale	Respondents	Total
1-11	37	52
12-13	35	23
14-18	28	25
Total	100	100

TABLE 2  
SHARE OF WOMEN IN SALARY SCALES

Scale	Share of women among respondents	Share of women in total
7-1	3	13
12-13	11	10
14-18	2	9
Total	6	25

TABLE 3  
EMPLOYMENT IN CENTRAL GOVERNMENT, 1988

age group	men	women
<25	40	60
25-34	70	30
35-44	83	17
45-54	84	16
>55	87	13

## APPLICATION

A majority of the ministries apply either retention bonuses or labor market allowances while a limited number applies both instruments. Retention bonuses are more frequently applied than labor market allowances: the ratio amounts to 2:1. One reason for choosing labor market additions as an instrument is that the problem of reclaiming (a part of) the premium cannot occur.<sup>5</sup> A reason for choosing retention bonuses is to make clear to the employees involved that the addition is nonrecurrent. Thus, officially there are major differences between retention bonuses and labor market allowances, as pointed out in the previous section.

In practice, however, these differences appear to be much smaller. Labor market allowances tend to be paid annually rather than monthly. Moreover, receivers of an addition do not always know whether it is actually a retention bonus or a labor market allowance. One of the recipients even noted that the same addition was called a retention bonus in one year and a labor market allowance in another year. Therefore, it seems advisable to introduce one uniform addition under one label.

Supplements are mainly awarded to men: only 6 percent are women.<sup>6</sup> This has something to do with the fact that women are concentrated in the lower salary scales. But, even if one takes this into account, the proportion of women in the additions is relatively low, except in grades 12 and 13, as shown in Table 2.

There are at least two additional factors causing a low percentage of women in the supplements. First, occupational segregation: the share of women in the centrally designated groups is low. For the total group of accountants, it amounts to 6 percent, for automation experts 7 percent, and 11 percent for financial economists. This is of relevance because 85-90 percent of the supplements are awarded in these groups;<sup>7</sup> second, the low proportion rate of women relative to that of men.

Table 3 exhibits that the proportion of women in central government employment is not only in general lower than that of men, but the difference also increases by age group. The share of women amounts to 30 percent in one age group 25-34 and only 17 percent in the age group 35-44 (Ministrie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 1989:58). This contributes to a low percentage of women in the supplements because receivers of additions are highly concentrated in the age group 35-44. The proportion of this latter group amounts to 57

percent whereas the category 25-44 has a share of 22 percent and the age group 45-54 has a share of only 17 percent. The high percentage of the 25-44-year-olds may be due to the fact that, for younger employees, other possibilities for extra pay increases are feasible, e.g., by accelerated passing through the salary scales, whereas older employees are less likely considering a transfer to the private sector. Moreover, the ministries report that the recruitment of newcomers to the labor market is not too difficult. As far as problems do occur, they are related to recruitment and retention of experienced employees.

The supplements are mainly awarded to persons in the higher salary scales. Two-thirds of the receivers of an addition are classified in grade 11 or higher whereas only 13 percent of the persons employed in the public sector are classified in these grades. No wonder that in general they are well-educated. Over three-quarters have a bachelor's or a master's degree. On average, the supplements amount to 9 percent of the gross annual wage which approximately equals a monthly salary. Therefore, a number of respondents refer to the addition as the "13th monthly salary." The amount of the supplements varies widely across ministries. The averages per ministry vary between 6 and 15 percent of the gross annual salary.

Opinions on the size of the additions differ, but over 50 percent of the respondents judge their addition too low. Not surprisingly, the extent of contentedness increases, the higher the addition one receives. On the macro level, however, the quantitative significance of the supplements is very limited. Only 2 percent of all civil servants are awarded an addition while the total sum involved amounts to approximately 0.25 percent of the wage sum. Consequently, the impact of the supplements on the female/male wage gap and on overall pay disparity both within the public sector and between the public and private sector must be negligible. In terms of Frederickson's (1990) compound theory of social equity and public administration, neither segmented equality (within the category) nor block equality (between categories) can significantly be affected by the additions.

It is notable that 22 percent of the retention bonuses are awarded under the condition that the receiver stays in his job for at least one year. According to the official rule, the minimum term of retention is three years. In practice, however, it appears unclear for what term retention bonuses are awarded. Even personnel managers of different ministries disagree in concrete cases on the exact term that

applies. Nonetheless, the vast majority of receivers of supplements is satisfied with the term for which the additions are awarded. This may mean that either the terms are tailor-made to the persons involved or that one is indifferent with respect to the term of retention. The latter seems likely because a difference in the term has very limited consequences. First, because the new employer of somebody who leaves before the end of the retention period often compensates his or her new employee for the loss of the premium in one way or another. Second, practice shows that most people who receive a retention bonus for one year receive the premium the following year again. Personnel managers of different ministries affirm that, once somebody has been awarded an addition, it is difficult to deny it next time.

### EFFECTIVENESS

Although the additions, in principle, are meant for both retention and recruitment of employees, only 2 percent of the respondents were awarded the addition when they were recruited.<sup>8</sup> Half of them mentioned the supplements as the actual reason for accepting the job. However, it appears that these persons have never worked in the private sector, rather they were recruited from other parts of the public sector. Obviously, the additions are almost irrelevant for recruiting employees from the private sector.<sup>9</sup>

Ministries seem reluctant in deploying supplements for the purpose of recruitment for two reasons. First, they do not want entrants still having to prove themselves in the organization to interfere with the existing earnings structure. Using an addition for recruitment may imply that entrants immediately earn more than their colleagues and possibly even more than their chief. Moreover, it is hardly possible to deny entrants an addition an addition next year. Second, ministries think more and more in terms of management development. In this personnel strategy, they recruit young employees for junior positions while offering them the prospect of developing management skills and promotions to senior positions. In such a situation of an internal labor market, short-term considerations play a minor role; rather, emphasis is put on strategic choices.

Obviously, in nearly all cases, the supplements are deployed to prevent employees from leaving their service unit. Approximately 2 percent of the receivers of an addition leave their job. However, moving within one ministry is a significant part of this mobility. It

TABLE 4  
LEAVERS AND STAYERS ACCORDING TO THE  
SIZE OF THE ADDITION

addition in % of salary	leavers for		stayers
	public sector	market sector	
0 - 7.5%	40	31	35
7.5 - 10%	36	19	40
10 - 12.5%	12	37	14
> 12.5%	12	13	11
Total	100	100	100

TABLE 5  
PERCENTAGE OF STAYERS WHO WOULD ALSO  
HAVE STAYED WITHOUT AN ADDITION

	size of the addition in % salary			
	0-7.5%	7.5-10%	>10%	total
yes, sure	32	19	8	21
yes, probably	46	48	55	48
no, probably not	6	13	19	12
no, sure	-	3	3	2
do not know	16	17	15	17
total	100	100	100	100

TABLE 6  
ORIENTATION OF STAYERS TO ANOTHER JOB

	<35	35-44	>44	those who lost their job	
				total	job
no orientation	19	38	54	37	56
looking around	69	54	37	54	31
actively applying	9	5	8	6	10
other	3	3	1	3	3

appears that less than 1 percent of the persons who are awarded an addition leave for the market sector. An interesting question is whether this very limited turnover is caused by the additions. In one of the interviews, it was posed that an addition facilitates a transfer to the market sector because supplements identify the persons who are of specific value to their employer. Some light can be shed on this question by comparing leavers and stayers on the basis of different characteristics.

In Table 4 they are distinguished by the size of the additions. It appears that half of the leavers for the market sector received a supplement of more than 10 percent of their salary whereas three-quarters of the leavers within the public sector received an addition of less than 10 percent of their salary. With regard to the leavers, this suggests that ministries award high supplements to those employees who are most likely to leave for the market sector. As to the stayers, however, this result suggests the additions may comprise a large windfall component. The same suggestion follows from the last column of Table 5 which displays that over two-thirds of the receivers of an addition would have stayed in the public sector anyway. Only 14 percent think they would have left if the addition was not awarded while only 2 percent report they were not sure of this.

It can be expected, in principle, that the retention effect will be larger the longer the term of retention. A long retention period means that the person involved ties himself up and will lose the entire addition by quitting before the end of the binding term. Indeed, the data provide some evidence that the windfall component is lower the longer the term of retention, but this effect is very limited. The same holds true for the size of the supplement.

Table 5 displays that additions exceeding 10 percent of the salary are more effective than supplements below 7.5 percent. Further increments of the addition, however, yield diminishing returns. Only 7 percent of the leavers state that they would have stayed if the supplement had been higher whereas 93 percent would have quit anyway. The financial betterment of leavers is often so high that it simply cannot be counterbalanced by an addition. Moreover, in particular, young, highly educated people sometimes choose to work in the public sector during several years after having completed their university education. They take advantage of the educational facilities offered by employers in the public sector in order to increase their educational level further. Only after having invested in their career by gaining experience and knowledge do they leave for the

market sector.

Both leavers and stayers are asked for what reasons employees change their jobs. Notably, employees who changed their jobs within the public sector report more frequently than those who left for the market sector that they did so for financial reasons. Stayers seemingly have a biased perception of the motives of leavers because the differences in the answers of the two groups are striking. Eight-five percent of the stayers think that people leave the public sector for financial reasons whereas only 29 percent of those who have actually left for the market sector mention financial betterment as their motive. Fifty-three percent of the leavers mention the content of their new job as their primary motive whereas only 5 percent of the stayers think that this is a reason to leave the public sector.

On the one hand, leavers probably hesitate to recognize that they left the public service for money. Many personnel managers report that the financial motive is rarely mentioned during exit interviews though they often feel that it was an important reason. On the other hand, however, stayers are likely to have a biased perception of the motives of the leavers. Anyhow, the financial motive plays a substantial role. Employees who move to the market sector enjoy substantial financial betterments: three-quarters of them receive an increment that exceeds the addition while they probably also gain in terms of fringe benefits.

### JOB ORIENTATION

The data also provide information about job orientation. Table 6 shows that orientation to other jobs diminishes according to age while older employees appear to orient themselves strongly to the public sector. Only 6 percent of all stayers actually applied for another job while another 3 percent already have the prospect of a new job. Furthermore, 54 percent of them are interested in developments on the labor market and are looking for possibilities. Over one-third (37 percent) of all stayers do not orient themselves to another job.

The figures concerning those stayers who did not receive an addition anymore after expiration of the retention term are somewhat different. Over half of them (56 percent) do not orient themselves to another job while 31 percent are looking around for possibilities on the labor market. However, the interpretation of these data is unclear. On the one hand, they may suggest a limited efficacy

because those who do not receive an addition anymore do not seem eager to move. On the other hand, however, the data may suggest that those whose labor market position has been weakened were not awarded an addition anymore. This would suggest that the additions were awarded to the right selection of employees, that is, those who are considering a job change. The stayers who orient themselves to another job were asked whether they are looking at the market sector or at the public sector. It appears that they do not confine themselves to the market sector: 55 percent are looking at both the public and the market sector. Notably, if one orients oneself to one sector, this is more often the public sector than the market sector.

The award of a retention bonus does not imply that one does not orient oneself to other jobs. This holds true even if the term of retention is over one year, although in this case the tendency to look for a job within the public sector is somewhat stronger. In particular, within one ministry it is possible to change one's job without having to refund the retention bonus. No wonder, therefore, that a long retention period reduces one's interest in jobs in the market sector but does not reduce one's interest in another job within the public sector. Finally, two other factors also affect job orientation. Respondents appear to orient themselves more strongly to the market sector the higher their salary scale while women appear to orient themselves more strongly to the public sector than men.

It seems useful to stress some of the data. First, a very limited part--less than 10 percent of all stayers--is actively applying for a job or already has the prospect of another job. Second, less than one percent of those receiving an addition has moved to the market sector. Third, two-thirds of those who stayed in their job would also have stayed without a supplement. Obviously, mobility between the public and market sector is limited. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that 54 percent of the respondents had never worked in the market sector at the moment they were awarded an addition. Thus, initial employment in the public sector often implies that the entire career will evolve in the same sector with the exception of those young persons with specific expertise who deliberately work for several years in the public sector in order to jump off to a senior position in the market sector.

### SIDE EFFECTS

The supplement may bring about both a positive and a negative

TABLE 7  
ASPECTS OF AN EMPLOYER THAT ARE  
CONSIDERED IMPORTANT

	all respondents	leavers for market sector	leavers non- receivers of an addition
content of the job	88	76	86
personal responsibility	72	82	69
working climate	64	41	57
salary	55	29	81
relation between pay and performance	50	47	50
career possibilities	41	59	57
organization	37	65	31
fringe benefits	25	24	40
educational facilities	23	18	26
job security	20	12	17
workload	15	6	14
status	7	18	10
total	100	100	100

effect. The positive effect arises from the feeling among receivers of an addition of being appreciated, whereas the negative effect stems from the feeling with some non-receivers of having been passed over. One-third of the respondents, being receivers of a supplement, mention the negative effect among non-receivers of the feeling of having been passed over. It can be expected that this percentage would have been substantially higher if the same question were asked of non-receivers. This negative side effect is an extra reason to deploy additions very selectively. One of the ministries that has awarded the supplements over a broad range reported that big internal problems were the result.

The addition may also influence the image of the public sector as employer. Generally, the majority of respondents ranks the market sector higher than the public sector. The opposite only appears to be true as far as job security is concerned. Furthermore, the public sector is judged slightly better as to the content of the work, educational facilities, the working climate, and the workload. As to the salary, the fringe benefits, the status, the personal responsibility, the organization, and the relation between pay and performance, the market sector is ranked much higher. Obviously, the overall judgment is favorable for the market sector: 68 percent of the respondents rank the market sector higher. Only 10 percent rank the public sector higher, whereas 22 percent rank both sectors equally. Notably, respondents tend to rank the public sector somewhat higher the higher their salary scale. Thus, it is not true that dissatisfaction with the public sector as employer particularly occurs in the higher ranks.

Table 7 displays that the content of the job, the personal responsibility, the working climate, and the salary are judged the most important aspects of an employer. If one aims at improving the image of the public sector as employer, it would thus be wrong to concentrate on financial matters only. This conclusion finds support furthermore in the finding that two-thirds of the respondents state that the introduction of supplements has not altered the image of the public sector as employer.

## SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In the Netherlands an apparent gap between public- and market-sector pay can be observed. However, mobility between the two sectors is very limited. Nonetheless, the Dutch government has introduced two instruments of a so-called differentiated pay policy:

retention bonuses and labor market allowances (in a ratio of 2:1). The additions mainly accrue to men who are highly educated, well-paid, between 35 and 45 years of age, and who belong to the four centrally designated groups: accountants, automation experts, financial economists, and tax experts. On average, the supplements amount to 9 percent of the gross annual wage which is in the order of one monthly salary.

In practice the difference between retention bonuses and market allowances appears to be unclear. Although the additions are meant for both retention and recruitment of employees, they are used almost exclusively for retention purposes. Furthermore, the supplements have not driven out other possibilities to credit employees with extra rewards. Nearly one-third of the additions cumulates with other special rewards such as gratuities and extra annual increments. However, most ministries set limitations on the cumulation of extra rewards. Moreover, they tend to integrate the different arrangements into one differentiated pay policy in an attempt to link pay to performance. Both managers and employees in the public sector consider the supplements the only successful attempt to break through the pay automatism (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 1991:68).

Generally, public sector employees are rather satisfied about the newly introduced instruments of pay policy. Moreover, this positive judgment does not stem from contentedness with the efficacy of the supplements, rather one considers the additions an extra possibility to stimulate well functioning employees by awarding them extra rewards. Sometimes it appears a problem to reclaim the retention bonus. Employees who were awarded such a premium but moved before the retention terms expired must refund a gross amount whereas they received a net amount. Although later fiscal clearance occurs, this hampers a smooth functioning of the retention bonus.

It appears that only 10 percent of those who are awarded a supplement consider this an appropriate instrument for retention or recruitment of employees. Over half consider the addition to be too low. Receivers of a retention bonus do not have a clear preference for shorter or longer periods of retention. Therefore it seems likely that they are rather indifferent as to the extension term.

The efficacy of the supplements seems limited. Only 14 percent of those who stayed in their job state that they would have moved if they were not awarded an addition. Another indication for a limited efficacy is that a small part (less than 10 percent) of those who

stayed in their job is actively applying for another job while the same holds true for those who do not receive an addition anymore. Moreover, people who move to another job mention the content of the job as their primary motive.

The supplements may bring about a positive and a negative side effect. The positive effect arises from the feeling among receivers of an addition of being appreciated by their employer. The negative effect stems from the feeling among some non-receivers of having been passed over. The latter effect is an extra reason to award supplements very selectively.

According to the unions, the additions are useful instruments of a differentiated pay policy. However, in their view, the supplements cannot prevent a new exodus of employees from the public sector after the exodus that already occurred in the early 1980s. The unions deem it necessary to tackle the structural gap between public and market pay. They state that the current lack of mobility between the two sectors is due to several factors. First, as a consequence of the exodus in the early 1980s, many young people were put in positions which they would have attained at a later stage of their career according to a more usual career pattern. In view of their age, they earn a reasonable wage, consequently, do not feel the need to move.

Second, according the unions, the pay gap is partly solved by rank inflation. However, this is denied by the Dutch Interior Minister (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 1990a:4). Although she admits that, during the 1980s, the average scale level has been increased by 0.8, she states that the underlying reason is not rank inflation. The main reason is an increase in the quality of labor inputs causing a higher ranking of jobs according to the system of job evaluation and, consequently, an increase of the average scale level.

Third, the unions state that the public sector is suffering a quality loss. They are convinced that this is an invisible and stealthy process already going on during a number of years. This would be in line with the finding that relatively few young university graduates seek a job in the public sector (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken, 1989:14). It is possible, indeed, that the public sector is losing quality by recruiting lower quality employees than the market sector. However, the problem is how to measure such possible differences.

## NOTES

1. The author is indebted to George Frederickson, Scott M. Fuess, Jr., Hyder

Lakhani, Lois Wise, and two anonymous referees for their valuable comments on earlier versions of this article.

2. The differential on Level 3 was not statistically significant. From Level 4, however, all differentials were statistically significant.
3. However, Lewis (1991) shows that a placid surface may hide changes in turnover patterns. He finds for the U.S. that propensities to leave the federal service have arisen among employees with substantial federal experience and perhaps among the college-educated.
4. The survey was sent to 494 persons. The response was 68 percent while 66 percent of the questionnaires that were sent out could be used for analyses. This implies that nearly 10 percent of the receivers of either a stay premium or a labor market allowance are involved in the analyses.
5. Practice shows, however, that reclaiming rarely poses a problem. Occasionally one refuses to refund the gross addition, rather one refunds the net amount received.
6. Thus, the Dutch data seem contrary to Wise's findings for two federal agencies in the USA (in this issue).
7. People outside the centrally designated groups receiving additions primarily hold high general managerial positions.
8. Lower level governments deploy additions more frequently for recruiting purposes than central government. It also seems that municipalities tend to judge the effectiveness of the additions more favorably than central government (BINNENLANDS BESTUUR, 27 July, 1990). The implementation of a differentiated pay policy, however, seems to be laborious at local government level (1990).
9. Surprisingly enough, about half of the respondents themselves think that additions do facilitate the recruitment of personnel.

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