

The Job of the Case Officer



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Background

About the report

This report has been drafted by the EUAA following a thematic meeting on the job of the case officer that took place on 17 and 18 October 2023, in Bratislava, Slovakia.

The report outlines the main themes that emerged during the thematic meeting and summarises the lines along which the discussions among participants unfolded. The content of the report draws from the contributions shared by representatives of asylum administrations of EU+ countries and other key stakeholders that reflected and exchanged on the key aspects that characterise the job of the case officer.

Acknowledgements

Special gratitude goes to Professor Nick Gill of the University of Exeter who shared insights from ethnographic (!) studies on what makes the job of case officers unlike any other everyday job, presenting the key dilemmas case officers face and the main drivers of their work.

Special thanks also to Mikael Ribbenvik Cassar, currently EUAA Deputy Executive Director, for his contribution on the role of case officers in the society and in the asylum administrations.

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A special thank you goes to all the presenters and participants to the thematic meetings for the experiences and thoughts shared on the key elements underlying the organisation of the work of case officers, their motivation and wellbeing.

(!) Ethnography is a type of qualitative research that involves immersing yourself in a particular community or organisation for a prolonged period to observe their behaviour and interactions. It also refers to the written research report the ethnographer produces afterwards. The strength of organisational ethnography is that it can give a realistic impression of how things work on the ground, rather than simply representing how things are thought to work from the outside, or how they are claimed to work by managers. It is particularly good at revealing the everyday life of employees. Its usefulness for understanding asylum determination has been set out in Gill, N., & Good, A. (eds.) (2019). *Asylum determination in Europe: Ethnographic perspectives* Cham: Springer Nature. A list of further readings recommended by Professor Gill is available in the Annex.



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Dilemmas of the job of the case officer

The case officer is the primary actor of the examination of applications for international protection. They are at the forefront of the process ensuring a fair and efficient asylum procedure. Case officers conduct the personal interviews, assess the applications and draft first instance decisions. Depending on the national context, they can also be involved in other tasks either directly or indirectly linked to the examination of the applications for international protection e.g. research and compilation of country of origin information (COI); scheduling interviews; and attending meetings with external stakeholders on asylum-related matters.

The job of the case officer entails a **high level of responsibility** and demands specific expertise. It requires the understanding of complex legal concepts, in-depth knowledge of the situation in the countries of origin of applicants for international protection, advanced competences with regards to communication, active listening and interviewing, and strong analytical skills.

Case officers deal with competing expectations and face various **dilemmas** in their everyday work. For example, in so far as they can control their **emotions**, they face a dilemma about the extent to which they allow themselves to become emotionally invested in the work, or remain distant from it. They must also decide how **transparent** to be to managers, colleagues and applicants. They need to be able to deal with **uncertainty** and navigate what is the room for manoeuvre in challenging aspects of their work. The job of the case officer is far from the typical desk job. It is multifaceted in nature and it touches upon crucial aspects of people's lives. Despite the challenges, it can be a very fulfilling job, especially when the necessary measures are put in place to address these challenges in a timely and effective way.

Responsibility and expectations

The job of the case officer entails a great level of responsibility. First and foremost, it entails responsibility towards applicants of international protection as their work can have serious consequences for applicants' lives. In addition, the case officer bears responsibility towards the asylum administration and society in general to conduct a fair and efficient assessment of applications for international protection.

There are many **competing expectations** from different stakeholders regarding the work of case officers. This includes expectations from managers, colleagues, the applicants, civil society organisations or interpreters but also the expectations case officers place on themselves. Migration is a polarising topic in the public sphere. There are different opinions regarding migration and the role of the case officer, as well as shifting political positions. There is often a limited understanding of the role of the case officer amongst the public. These competing expectations and directions can create a tense working environment for case officers.





Personal ethics and the **values** of case officers, such as efficiency, fairness, integrity, adherence to the direction of the office and sense of duty towards colleagues, provide a compass to navigate uncertainty. Case officers are guided by a variety of values that influence their approach as decision-makers. Being efficient and concise can be paramount for some. Some may consider neutrality and objectiveness particularly important. Some may find it essential to be emotionally engaged while others, on the contrary, prefer to keep an emotional distance. Most case officers are guided by more than one value at any one time, and the importance they place on one value may change over time. These aspects influence the way in which case officers make decisions and deal with the uncertainty that characterises the job (see also Section [‘Uncertainty in the decision-making’](#)).

The administration can support case officers through Intervision ⁽²⁾, encouraging the sharing of experience and team building. The administration can also engage in clear communication strategies, developing clear messages to better educate the public on international protection and the role of the asylum administration. Even if the impact of these messages on the public at large may be limited, such messaging can help case officers navigate their work in a discourse marked by misunderstanding in part or in full of their role.

Emotional engagement and distance

The job of the case officer also entails emotional labour. Research has revealed a **range of emotions** associated with the work of the case officer, ranging from anger to pity, frustration, excitement, horror, thrill, gratitude, elation and job satisfaction. For example, case officers can experience feelings of horror while listening to an applicant’s narration of their experiences of persecution. Case officers can feel angry at hearing of people trying to manipulate and take advantage of applicants, frustration because of job insecurity, thrill due to the unpredictability of the personal interview or elation for making a real difference in people’s lives.

There is a risk of **emotional overload** for case officers. This can lead to feelings of numbness, withdrawal and indifference. Furthermore, there is a risk of experiencing vicarious trauma for case officers stemming from the applicants’ own traumatic accounts and from the triggering of one’s own trauma, if any. A sensed affinity with a particular case could lead the case officer to feeling personally implicated, which can also affect their objectivity in the process. Staying in the job as well as maintaining your objectivity requires emotional stamina, which can be nurtured by sensitive and empathetic managerial approaches.

Case officers deal with emotions in many ways depending on their personalities, the length of their tenure in the job and the working cultures of their administration. There are measures that can be taken to **mitigate the case officer’s emotional strain**, such as the possibility for case officers to refuse to take a case if it would trigger past trauma or if there is an affinity with the case that might affect their objectivity. Other measures include peer mentoring and, at a

(2) Intervision is a form of knowledge development in a small group that shares a common challenge or problem. The core feature is mutual support and consultation between equals. It is an opportunity for professionals and colleagues to use the expertise of others to help them to gain valuable insights.





general level, working towards embedding the principles of respect and kindness into the work.

Training on how to receive accounts of traumatic experiences can also be important. Counselling is also used in various administrations to offer support to case officers (for more details see the Section '[Ensuring wellbeing](#)'). Most importantly, case officers need to be empowered – in the sense that feel ownership of their work, that they have a say in how it is conducted, and that their work matters, and is valued - in their role from the very beginning and throughout their careers.

Transparency

Case officers face the **dilemma of transparency**; how transparent, or communicative, can or should they be about the difficulties they encounter during the examination of an application. Case officers can show different levels of transparency towards their supervisors, their colleagues, the applicants, friends outside the office or even within the written decisions themselves. It can be hard to find the right balance in the level of transparency.

Time pressure in issuing a decision can affect how transparent a case officer is with their supervisor or manager for fear of being mistrusted if they do not deliver on time. Working in a specific office or unit is part of the primary identity of the case officer. There can be various differences across offices or units within the same national administration, such as the working environment, whether the case officers are generalists or specialise in countries/topics, whether there is the possibility to discuss feelings in relation to work, etc. These differences can play a role in the way case officers manage their tasks and how their work is perceived by their colleagues. Office politics and office gossip can influence how transparent a case officer is with their colleagues both within the team and across teams. Managing the politics between offices can be hard to balance.

Another challenging aspect is how transparent to be with the applicant or to what extent a distance should be kept. Case officers need to be objective and neutral towards all applicants. It can be difficult at times to balance this with creating a welcoming atmosphere of trust for the applicant.

Furthermore, in the written decision itself, case officers often have to make a choice as to how transparent they are in the reasoning of the asylum decision. This choice can be a cause of frustration for them for fear of providing a blueprint that can be used by other applicants in their claims.

The dilemma of transparency stretches well outside the walls of the office. The media or the public can be critical towards asylum administrations and case officers. Working as a case officer can feel like being constantly under scrutiny, much more so than in many other fields of work. This can lead to a siege mentality among case officers, where non-responsiveness to outside views is valued. When it comes to specific cases, the case officer also needs to respect the principle of confidentiality. Fostering a **peer-to-peer support culture** can play a central role for case officers in addressing this dilemma.





Examining applications for international protection

The case officer holds the key role of conducting the individual examination of applications for international protection through interviewing the applicants, gathering evidence to substantiate the application and drafting decisions on international protection. This examination process however entails uncertainty that can be challenging for the case officer to navigate.

Uncertainty in the decision-making

The Common European Asylum System lays down the standards for the qualification for international protection and procedures for granting international protection. These standards establish a framework within which applications for international protection are examined.

Uncertainty in the decision-making process however arises from the characteristics of the asylum procedure and the specific position of the applicant. This can concern, for example, a lack of documentary evidence to substantiate the application, the varying degrees of the applicant's ability to convey the narrative and cooperation, or the possible lack of COI in relation to the current situation in the country of origin. This uncertainty concerns core aspects of the examination, including establishing what happened to the applicant in the past and what will happen to them in the future.

Case officers feel **serious responsibility** for the examination of applications. According to research, dealing with this uncertainty is one of the most difficult aspects of their job. Case officers may feel overly responsible for the outcome of the application, particularly when the application entails several factors that create uncertainty and the outcome of the application relies largely on the credibility assessment of the applicant's statements. This responsibility can become a burden if the case officer feels responsible for what happens to the applicant for international protection after the decision is issued.

Long-term exposure to the feeling of carrying too much responsibility may lead to **credibility fatigue**, which can, for example, make the case officer seek to avoid hearing statements about negative life experiences. As a consequence, the case officers may find it challenging to stay objective when processing applications for international protection.

Asylum administrations put in place **measures to reduce the uncertainty** and responsibility of case officers. These measures include, for example, guides, tools, standard operating procedures and training courses that outline how the legal standards should be implemented in the examination of applications. They are intended for communicating formal knowledge to case officers, while training can also be used for developing key competences that are needed in the job. Thus, they aim to harmonise practices within the asylum administration and provide a methodology for the case officer to follow during the examination of applications.





This guidance nevertheless needs to allow for flexibility to carry out an individual assessment of each application and recognise the complexity of the examination process. For this reason, it is often good to limit the length of guidance documents and the number of guidance documents.

Tacit knowledge

The individual assessment of each application includes uncertainty that cannot be eliminated by guidance. As a result, case officers often acquire **informal knowledge** in relation to how the individual examination is carried out in practice. This tacit knowledge is based on experience of how things are normally done and office culture in relation to the examination process. For example, tacit knowledge can relate to how guidance is commonly interpreted by case officers and implemented in practice. It can also relate to situations when the asylum administration processes a high backlog of applications and sets demanding quantitative performance targets for each case officer. In these circumstances, the officer may perceive that being fast is the main expectation over other aspects of the examination process.

It can be difficult to put tacit knowledge into words and **purposefully communicate it** to case officers. This is why it may not end up open for reflection and discussion in the same manner as formal knowledge. This may result in inconsistent interpretations of what is intended by the asylum administration.

There can be several ways to discuss and communicate to case officers the tacit knowledge on how the examination is carried out in practice. For example, it is possible to build a consultation culture that ensures concerns and challenges are discussed and common solutions are formulated. The consultation culture can include, for example, frequent feedback from the supervisors on draft decisions that does not entail only corrections in writing but oral feedback and discussions within a team about the decision-making practices. Similarly, regular meetings across branch offices and units on select topics can help bring tacit knowledge to the fore that might otherwise remain unexplored.

Case officers can also be encouraged to reflect on their own tacit knowledge. To this end, it is possible, for example, to foster peer-to-peer mentoring among case officers and self-reflection in a controlled environment to investigate any biases.





Towards a viable job

The ways in which the work of case officers is **organised and structured**, as well as the work environment and space, are important factors that influence the viability of the job in the long term. Good **working conditions** have a positive impact on the case officer's wellbeing and motivation to remain in the job, though complementary and dedicated efforts are needed to maintain individual **motivation and wellbeing**. Positive work conditions also foster improved quality of the case officer's work.

A high **turnover** of case officers can weigh heavily on the efficiency of the asylum procedure through the loss of expertise. It also requires investment in the recruitment and training of new case officers, who need a relatively long time to be able to work independently in an efficient way.

Due to the importance and complexities of the job carried out by case officers, asylum administrations are conscious of the necessity of putting in place **measures to create sustainable working conditions**. Availability of resources at times is an obstacle to the realisation of initiatives and implementation of these measures. Limitations can affect the workspace, contracts and benefits, and the existence of support units and functions. Where possible, determining authorities can experiment and pilot (innovative) approaches as elaborated below.

Organisation of work contributing to autonomy

The organisation of a case officer's work profoundly influences their motivation and wellbeing, as well as the quality and the efficiency of their work. Autonomy emerges as a pivotal principle that is also identified as a key driver of motivation for case officers and plays a central role in developing a sense of ownership and accountability.

Organisation can be operationalised by allowing **flexibility in task allocation** based on skills and interests. Regarding time management, **interview scheduling systems** allowing case officers to decide their schedules, and/or booking interview slots well in advance can greatly enhance the autonomy of case officers.

Solidarity, equity and trust are all equally crucial. **Collective production targets** as opposed to individual ones might foster a sense of unity and allow the balancing out of the impact of complex cases with straightforward ones.

Some administrations divide work based on **specialisation** in a given caseload to boost quality and efficacy, while others experiment with **case selection** by case officers to manage workload dynamics. **Versatility in roles** can increase efficiency (and motivation), for example when a supervisor also takes up coaching, case processing, screening or training functions.

In smaller administrations, case officers often undertake a **multitude of tasks**. This can diversify their responsibilities, expose them to potentially interesting roles and allow for autonomy in some of the activities. At the same time, it can also prove to be quite demanding





and require their involvement in more administrative tasks. Even in smaller administrations, to the extent this is feasible, having other dedicated staff taking up some of the tasks related to the examination, such as COI research or issuing invitations and notifications, can help increase the efficiency of case officers, allowing them to focus on the most substantive tasks.

The **induction process** often has a defining impact on the perception case officers develop of their jobs and role, and on the (formal and informal) knowledge they absorb. This process includes the first weeks or months at the office during which case officers integrate into the new work environment, undergo training and familiarise themselves with the job. Some administrations are piloting new models of induction, such as organising a common induction programme for pools of new recruits managed by dedicated staff, rather than an induction tailored by the unit to which the case officer is assigned. This enables a uniform induction experience for all new case officers and minimises the burden that would otherwise fall on the various case-processing units if they had to manage the caseworkers' induction themselves and at different times..

Information technology systems and tools can likewise be support the case officers in carrying out their tasks.

Finally, the **physical working environment** undoubtedly plays an important role in shaping the dynamics between case officers, other colleagues and managers. This requires striking a balance between, for example, creating an environment that allows case officers to work in a focused way and at the same time facilitating interactions among colleagues. The workspace is also an element that affects the case officer's morale and can, if positively arranged, boost their motivation. Office arrangements should reflect the significance of the case officer's work.

Drivers of motivation

Case officers can feel proud of the role that they play, due to the importance and value associated with it by the case officers themselves as well as by others. Despite the inherent challenges, the job can be both appealing and stimulating.

Maintaining the motivation of case officers is an essential factor in the prevention of high turnover and in maintaining the quality of their work. A set of measures to foster motivation could be implemented on a regular basis, ensuring transparency and equal opportunities for all case officers. At the same time, understanding that each case officer is a unique individual with distinct sources of motivation is crucial. Administering one-size-fits-all incentives may not be as effective as **tailoring measures** to suit the specific needs of each officer. Individualisation can enhance effectiveness and yield better results in terms of measures to foster motivation.

There are various **drivers of motivation** and corresponding incentives can be provided accordingly. These may include increasing levels of autonomy and responsibility and opportunities for personal and professional development. Creating safe learning environments allows case officers to feel physically, psychologically and emotionally secure to engage in learning activities, share ideas, be transparent and explore new concepts without fear of judgement or negative consequences. Inviting case officers to participate in specialised meetings inside or outside the workplace provides opportunities for personal and professional





development. Contributing to the development of guidelines, supporting new officers and receiving appreciation from managers are all significant motivating factors.

A challenge remains in monitoring motivation levels as well as in assessing the impact of measures taken and incentives offered. A regular dialogue between case officers and managers is essential in addressing these questions, yet further exploration and research is warranted to find comprehensive answers.

Ensuring wellbeing

Considering the **challenges** of the job of case officers, including the emotional labour, the level of responsibility and the dilemmas they face on a daily basis, maintaining their wellbeing becomes essential. Putting in place measures to ensure the wellbeing of case officers is therefore important for maintaining their (mental) health and motivation as well as for the quality of their work. The existence of such initiatives should not imply a victimisation of case officers, whose job presents undeniable challenges, but rather offer opportunities for empowering and safeguarding them.

Most of the administrations that shared their experiences in the meeting proposed measures to foster the wellbeing of case officers that anticipate participation on a voluntary basis. Common measures include **interview** sessions, which provide room for case officers to share issues in a group environment with the discussion facilitated by one person. Some rely (or relied) on external experts to manage such activities (e.g. psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.), while others on internal resources (e.g. staff trained in counselling, peer support, etc.).

Some case officers appreciate external experts as they bring useful expertise that the asylum administration does not possess (e.g. psychiatrists with expertise in trauma). Others, on the contrary, regret that external experts are not knowledgeable on the context and the reality of their work. In some countries, such activities take place in the premises of the administrations, which makes it logistically convenient, while in others they take place elsewhere, with the advantages of being hosted in a neutral or distinctly different environment.

In addition to these structured activities, other measures can be put in place to foster wellbeing. It is useful when managers make themselves available to engage and have open **dialogue** with case officers (for example, senior managers meeting case officers through planned monthly meetings open to all relevant staff, hours in the week when they have open doors so colleagues can drop in, or middle managers creating opportunities for interaction on a day-to-day basis). The use of **suggestion boxes**, where case officers can submit their ideas, feedback, concerns or their suggestions anonymously or openly, can also be a helpful instrument to encourage and facilitate communication between case officers and management, allowing for the exchange of ideas and improvement suggestions.





Annex

Further readings: Ethnographic perspectives on the job of the case officer

List of readings recommended by Professor Nick Gill and selected references of his keynote speech

Books

Affolter, L. (2021). *Asylum matters: On the front line of administrative decision-making* (p. 203). Springer Nature. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/43293>

Dahlvik, J. (2018). *Inside asylum bureaucracy: Organizing refugee status determination in Austria* Springer Nature <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/f456be77-fd10-4d2f-90b4-c39b16ce71ab/1002218.pdf>

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Gill, N., & Good, A. (2019). *Asylum determination in Europe: Ethnographic perspectives* Springer Nature. <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/26029>

Poertner, E. (2018). *Re-cording lives: Governing asylum in Switzerland and the need to resolve* transcript Verlag <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/49638#:text=Based%20on%20ethnographic%20research%20in,applicants%20in%20terms%20of%20asylum>

Shorter Pieces

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Ramirez, O. M. V., Faria, C., & Torres, R. M. (2021). Good boys, gang members, asylum gained and lost: The devastating reflections of a bureaucrat-ethnographer. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 38.

Giudici, D. (2021). Beyond compassionate aid: Precarious bureaucrats and dutiful asylum seekers in Italy. *Cultural Anthropology*, 36(1): 25-51.

Katherine Jensen (2023): From the asylum official's point of view: frames of perception and evaluation in refugee status determination, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(13): 3455-3472.



