

## Mini\*Midi\*Mef (MMM)

Child care service for public sector employees

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**Organisation:** Italy's Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF)

**Country:** Italy

**Level of government:** Central government

**Sector:** General public services

**Type:** Public Service

**Launched in:** 2011

**Overall development time:** 18 months

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# Description

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MMM is a free care and entertainment service aimed at children of employees from 4 to 12 years. The services are allocated at the Ministry Headquarters in Rome and in nearby external sports facilities during summer. MMM is operational on weekdays during the times of year when school services are interrupted.

In the morning before starting work, employees can leave their children in care and collect them at lunch time. If their working hours involve an afternoon, they can also leave them after lunch and collect them in the evening. The care activities are managed by qualified child care staff.

Before the initiative, the only work-life balance service offered by MEF was aimed at families of employees with young children (3 months to 3 years). This service was offered by the company nursery operating in a facility detached from the Ministry Headquarters. Once the children were over 3 years, the families of employees could no longer use the service. Working parents and particularly mothers – on whom most family commitments typically fall – found themselves alone in providing child care during periods of disruption of school activities.

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## Why the innovation was developed

MMM responds to a gap in our national law. In fact, such a service is not contemplated by Italy's social system, neither at state or local level. The gap in the provision of services to cope with the work-life balance left by the school and by other institutions is filled mainly with the aid of the extended family (if available), or by the use of paid services (if affordable). The organisation of the daily lives of two children for a good part of the Summer can be a sacrifice that is beyond the reach of many of the families of MEF employees. As such, during these periods, employees with children, mainly women, are forced to take leave using vacation time, or opting for one of the possible ways of working part-time. This often leads to an increase in absenteeism. During the school holidays, many employees with no better alternatives often have to bring their children to the office during their working day. This situation, as well as representing a suboptimal solution for children, causes a worsening in the quality of parents' participation in working procedures, and the need to be absent from work for long periods.

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## Objectives

Develop staff capacity, Improve social equity

- Allow the full use of the Administration's (female) talent through better work-life balance.
  - Increase the entire organisation's productivity.
  - To meet the real life needs of a large portion of personnel. The Mini\*Midi\*Mef supplies the families of employees with a service of significant economic value.
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## Main beneficiaries

Families, General population, Government bodies, Government staff, Young people

The Mini\*Midi\*Mef was set up primarily to allow a better work-life balance. This leads to the full and serene participation in work processes of female personnel at all levels. The Mini\*Midi\*Mef advantages are equally valid for male employees too. Overall, more than 800 employees with school-age children account for about 20% of the personnel at the main MEF buildings near the Ministry's HQ. Employees who have actually used the service are evenly distributed throughout all contract levels, including managers.

# Results

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## Efficiency

A partial measure of the impact achieved in terms of efficiency can be gleaned by the change in the attendance rate of the personnel who used the service.

The attendance rate (days worked / working days) during the service's usage period compared to the same period of the previous year, shows an average increase of 6%, for both men and women. The maximum increase was for female managers, 11%, followed by female white-collar workers, 8%.

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## Effectiveness

The effectiveness of the service is confirmed by the fact that the attendance rate of employees who use the MMM is on average higher than that of other employees with children of the same age. This could be an indication that users did not use the service to merely substitute a day of leave, but to increase their participation in work processes they consider “critical”.

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## Evaluation

Beside the quantitative analysis carried out through attendance rate data, qualitative analysis was implemented through questionnaires to all potential users, and satisfaction questionnaires to the actual ones. In particular, 21% of users valued the experience of the service by their sons and daughters as “good”, and 76% as “excellent”. Referring to the overall service, the percentage of users evaluating it as “good” raised to 24%, in the face of the same percentage of 76% of users evaluating it as “excellent”.

Additionally, during the final step of UNPSA evaluation process, the Mini\*Midi\*Mef initiative has been evaluated by a sub-committee of the United Nations Committee of Experts in Public Administration, which is a subsidiary organ of the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

Please e-mail [opsi@oecd.org](mailto:opsi@oecd.org) to receive a selection of documents related to Mini\*Midi\*Mef's participation to UNPSA 2013.

# Development

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## Design

The original idea of a work-life balance service, such as MMM, has matured within the Managers Equal Opportunities Committee of the Ministry (back then, headed by the actual Personnel Director). The need was highlighted by the managers who are mothers with school-age children. They feel it even more intensely because of their higher work loads compared to other employees. The staff have participated actively in the design of the service to the point of anxiously awaiting the start of its activities. In fact, personnel came to consider the initiative as an item of qualifying work experience, since it was realized it could help to strengthen the perception of MEF as a public employer at the forefront of personnel policies, attentive to the needs of women and committed to enhancing its human resources.

Design time: 6 months

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## Testing

In view of the novelty of the service (both for MEF that had to dispense it, and for the personnel who had to benefit from it), a two-way communication relationship with the staff was set.

Given the limited amount of information available before the start of the activities, dialogue with the staff appeared to be the only way to reconcile the realisation constraints faced by the administration and user needs. The communication campaign has raised awareness of the equal opportunities issue, an issue that never before had occurred in MEF in such an easily appreciable and concrete way.

As it was clear that, at least in its early stages, the service would have the connotation of an experimental initiative, it has been designed to be as flexible and modifiable as possible during operations. The steady feedback coming from users through questionnaires and customer satisfaction analysis made it possible to operate a continuous fine-tuning of the service that allowed the evolution of its details as it was carried out in different periods of the year, each one always characterized by slightly different user needs.

Testing time: 4 months

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## Implementation

### Tools used:

In order to manage the somewhat complex mechanics of a rankings functioning, a dedicated web-based application called “MMMA” (Mini Midi Management Application), has been developed.

Once completed and consolidated MMMA will:

- Collect registrations.
- Dynamically generate rankings for access to the service.
- Ensure maximum coverage of available places via multiple tenders.
- Help manage possible special requests from users.
- Manage the on-site presence of children and educators.
- Automatically contact users upon rankings definition.
- Archive data on previous editions.
- Enable business intelligence on usage data.

Italy's legislation on re-use of IT programmes (“or parts thereof”) enables Public Administrations to reuse, free of charge, IT programmes or parts thereof developed on behalf of or paid by another Administration and to adjust them to their own needs.

The MMMA technological and functional features enable fast exporting and disseminating within other institutions and/or public bodies.

MMMA is an important tool for MMM service model exportation and replication, as it is conceived to incorporate all of its main management processes and maintain high functional parametrability.

### Resources used:

From the beginning, the MMM project envisaged that part of the resources necessary for its startup and operation should be acquired through ways not economically burdensome for the Ministry.

An invitation to participate through a competitive sponsorship was published. Furthermore, the opportunity to contribute to the project has been given to employees, by donating books, toys and teaching materials, either new or in good condition.

For the entire first year of service the total volume budgeted for expenditure (mainly to finance the external provision of the care and entertainment services) today amounts to approximately EUR 38 000, while the initial investment for restructuring the premises and for purchasing the furniture and the equipment is estimated at approximately EUR 80 000.

From the point of view of human resources used, they approximately correspond to 0.75 FTE of administrative staffing to manage daily booking lists and activities during operations. An additional 0.10 FTE of administrative staffing and of 0.15 FTE of officer staffing per day must be added throughout the year, for a total of about 85 man-days of administrative staffing and 45 man-days of officer staffing used since the start of the service to date.

Implementation time: 6 months

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## Diffusion

- Presenting the initiative at conferences and seminars. In June 2012, MMM was presented at a conference organised by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and by Armida, the association of the female senior management of the public administration. In October 2013 the project will be presented as a case study at a seminar organized by Rome's Tor Vergata University for its master courses in public governance.
- Drafting a Guide to adoption. Through a simple step-by-step implementation guide, a more general service model than currently used in the MMM, is offered. This model will be used to assess the possibility of further future implementations within an organisation of the Ministry. It in fact extends the scope of possible applications beyond that of the central Public Administration operating in Rome, and could provide additional support to other Administrations, including those that operate in relatively different contexts from that of the MEF, to implement a similar service.
- Partnering with institutional subjects in the field of gender equality. The Department for Equal Opportunities has taken a keen interest in the possibility of replicating the initiative in other administrations and once gained access to all project documentation, it monitors closely the implementation and evolution of its developments.

Diffusion time: ongoing

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## Challenges and solutions

- Filling a gap not only in services provided by MEF, but also in those provided nationally. This made it necessary to develop a new business model for a service that did not exist before in Italy. The innovative feature of the initiative has made the implementation of the project difficult, since no reference was available that could provide useful guidance to the design of the operative aspects of the service. The regulatory gap in this matter has left a high degree of autonomy in the definition of MMM procedures, allowing the development of solutions that are targeted as much as possible to the needs of the personnel of a public administration. The unique organisational solution implemented is somewhere between the two models of service recognised under Italian law: *crèche* and *“ludoteca”* (roughly translatable to “playschool”), which does not allow custody and requires the sharing with parents of educational playing activities. Unlike both services, characterized by free access throughout the day, MMM works in shifts and by reservation.
  - Designing the reservation system operation. The system had to combine the guarantee of fair access (based on household income and on the needs arising from its composition and its specific conditions) with the offer of a flexible and differentiated service. It had to be able to continue its operation despite several tardy cancellations and, at the same time, had to be able to meet the equally numerous requests for access without reservation. During the summer, the service has also faced unexpected and significant operational difficulties, caused by a constant and considerable overbooking. An online self-service application, accessible from the extranet of the Ministry, was finally implemented. Thanks to this, the opportunity to use the service due to an unexpected (and therefore potentially critical) need has always been granted.
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## Partnerships

### support group

Other

The MMM initiative didn't benefit from any formal partnership, but was backed and supported by several public and private subjects.

In order to obtain funding for the project, in Summer 2010 MEF successfully participated in a competition held by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers – Department for Equal Opportunities, aimed at rewarding the sharing of success stories in the field of equal opportunities within the public administrations. Thanks to that, the project is going to benefit from funding by the Department corresponding to about EUR 10 000. Furthermore, in order to participate in the final steps of selection of the UNPSA 2013 (see paragraph 18), the initiative was presented to the United Nations by two letters of recommendation highlighting its value.

The first was from the National Counselor for Equality, the executive, non-partisan body that, on behalf of the Minister of Labour and the Minister for equal opportunities, works to promote equality between women and men in the Italian workforce.

The second letter was from the President of Valore D, the first Italian association bringing together 73 large companies with the aim of increasing the number of women in management positions in Italian leading industries.

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# Lessons Learned

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## Lessons Learned

- A work-life balance service can be even more effective, in terms of facilitating equal gender opportunities, than a regulatory intervention introducing provisions for compliance on how employees should work. In fact, policies of the latter kind are at first often met with little enthusiasm by those presumed to be protected by them, namely women. These policies, introducing somewhat "artificially" favorable conditions for female employees, such as minimum quotas of participation in processes, may be perceived as factors that diminish the dignity of working women, who are not interested in more favorable – compared to men – conditions, but rather on an equal footing with the opposite sex.
  - The provision of a work-life balance service requires for its implementation less legislative autonomy than that necessary to affect the implementation of equal opportunities by intervening on remuneration, rewards and hiring policies of female staff. As a matter of fact, in public administration the principles and methods of implementation of these policies are regulated by national law and individual administrations cannot modify it independently, except to a limited extent.
  - Finally, these rules, in order to be respected and thus become effective, need time to find their own position within the organisational culture recognized and endorsed by employees. Until then, they need control and enforcement mechanisms not generally easy to implement. Otherwise, the utility generated by the provision of a service tends to be perceived by staff as more "tangible" than an organisational rule, so better understood and more easily accepted.
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## Conditions for success

In order to activate such a service without excessive set up costs, a public or private organisation should have suitable spaces inside its premises. A strong leadership to communicate project's advantages to political or corporate stakeholders is necessary, as well as an highly motivated development team encompassing skills from several fields (pedagogy, architecture, administrative law, communication).

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## Other information

In 2013, MMM has been selected as one of the winners of the United Nations Public Service Award, the most prestigious international recognition of excellence in public service. The initiative competed in the "Promoting Gender-Responsive Delivery of Public Services" category.

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