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**25.01.2013**

## **BACK TO WORK**

**Counselling Returning Migrants and Unemployed, LLP-  
LdV/TOI/2010/RO/023**

**Online testing report**

## 1. Introduction

The **Back to Work** project aims to develop the validation and recognition of knowledge and competencies unemployed people have previously acquired, in different contexts, as part of employment services, in order to facilitate better matching between needs and competencies on the labor market.

One of the main objectives of the project was to to develop a **counselling instrument** that:

- Contains specific and concrete methods for helping counselor to assist the clients to discover the competences they acquired in different contexts and orient them toward the validation process
- Reveals the unexplored and unexploited competences of unemployed people
- Contributes to raising the self esteem, to valorize of what people know and know how to do, even they don't have a paper/ a certificate to demonstrate it.

The second very important product is the **User Guide**, which:

- Contains guidelines for the counselors, how to use and how to apply the instrument;
- Contains case studies from real experiences for a better understanding of counseling for validation process;
- Explains the exercise for clients.

The third product that was objective of the testing was the **online mentoring platform**.

## 2. Objective of report

The main objective of the Back to Work testing phase was to have **valid and comprehensive instruments, which would have genuine and sustainable impact on the practices of labor professionals in the partner countries and throughout Europe.**

In order to achieve that the instrument had to be tested in two ways – face to face testing (during the counselors meeting in Romania) and, as the initial idea was, via the online mentoring platform, where the participants were to be assisted in using and applying the instrument.

The report was to be completed by other data sources as well:

- Feedback from potential beneficiaries.
- Feedback from national meetings/presentation to potential users.
- Feedback from partner institutions and networks.

All of the above information was to be put in a common report, the instruments improved accordingly and the final result presented to the interested parties for future implementation.

## 3. Challenges in the implementation of initial plan and necessary changes.

After the testing phase in Bucharest a report was produced by ARCA that stressed largely on the meeting / training itself and not so much on the products, as they were in a very early phase.

Due to further complications the online mentoring platform started with a significant delay too and unfortunately the scheduled for 20-30 September 2012 Back to Work online testing of the instrument and the user guide was poorly attended making the results irrelevant.

Thus the coordinator and partners decided on a different approach to the online testing – after the instrument and user guide had a near finished form and were presented during the final conference special questionnaires were to be sent to the participant experts and feedback gathered. This feedback would be supplemented with feedback from national exploitation workshops and feedback from counselors and psychologists working with unemployed people.

This would allow for a final revision of the instrument before production.

The following report is based on the structure of the questionnaire, reflects the data collected with the above mentioned methods and the conclusions are based on them.

## **OVERALL IMPRESSIONS FROM THE PROJECT AND PRODUCTS**

**How do the Back to Work project and products relate to your field of activities? What were your main goals in taking part in the testing of B2W instruments? Please elaborate.**

The Back to Work online testing gathered feedback from job counselors, psychologists and experts in the National Employment Agency (Bulgaria), local employment agencies and job centres (Romania, Denmark, UK, Greece), adult training centres, general adult education centres (Denmark), students in adult education and career counselling (Germany), and counsellors and clients in a juvenile offenders institution (Germany).

The main goals of the respondents in taking part in the testing were job development, self-development and the opportunity to become a member in a thematic group across Europe. Some of the participants had experience with similar projects (Romania) and wanted to see new practices and tools that were developed in the field of validation. Others pointed out that they felt the instrument will help to coach migrants or even clients in other professional fields who are facing (voluntarily or involuntarily) a change in life or professional direction and who are seeking support, help and assistance from qualified, open-minded and innovative counselors.

### **Were these goals largely fulfilled?**

The information, methodological and theoretical aspects of the instrument was largely understood.

Some of the respondents felt they have the opportunity to learn something important for their job, to test themselves in this and interact with other colleagues whenever they have time or feel that they need to do so. Also, they felt the instrument was a good way to reflect on their own career path, thus helping them to develop in different areas

Part of the respondents felt that the fulfillment of the goals lies in the additional focus that is placed towards informal education and professional skills which people obtain during their life time or just while belonging to the global work force. They felt that not only that the recognition of their acquired competences - may they be formal or informal - will boost their self-esteem, it also give human kind a feeling of belonging to the society and being appreciated by their work environment, boss, colleagues, family or anybody they are dealing with - in their private or business surroundings.

### **How would you rate the overall usefulness of the B2W instruments in carrying out counselling?**

Most of the participants found the overall usefulness of the Back to Work instruments in carrying out counselling to be excellent, because:

- It helped them in their self-development as a counselor
- It gave them know-how about their clients and their background
- It gave them the very tools to work with their clients
- They can easily use the instrument for validating their client`s non-formal/informal learning
- Counselors are much more able to identify previous experiences and competencies of their clients thus helping the in a much quicker and more productive way to place them into the workforce. It allowed them to be in a position to recognized and evaluate interests, capabilities and competences

of a job seeking individual and comparing or matching those characteristics, skills and professional knowledge into a "job announcement platform" it will speeding up the placement into a job right from the beginning.

### **How innovative is the instrument?**

The respondents were somehow divided on the innovation of the tool. Some felt it was innovative because it is a flexible self development tool and said they can see **themselves** being creative and innovative with the tool, tailoring it according to their clients and being very flexible in implementing it - time wise and considering the person's personal circumstances.

Other respondents were familiar with similar projects / products (Profill Pass and ICOVET) but nevertheless felt it was innovative in relation to the Counselors' competence for validation

### **What did you particularly like about the instrument?**

The main advantages of the instrument, according to the respondents, can be summarized as such:

- The products help counsellors to be aware of own strengths and weaknesses, or to elaborate the tool/instrument does not only address the potential client (migrants etc) but also includes and connects to the skills and competencies of the counselor or coach. The counselor is also being challenged in implementing his or her skills, knowledge and competencies and the sum of methods and processes being used to evaluate had a reflection on the coach and the client.
- The division between general competences and supplementary competences that are required for career guidance counsellors working with RPL is useful.

- The division of competences in the areas social activities, family life, hobbies, voluntary sector and work in the client centred section is useful.
- The products provide a guided approach to counselling of returning migrants and unemployed people.
- In the juvenile offenders institution the “Back to Work” validation instrument came in very handy since a lot of these young people did not complete any school or professional education in any respect. Therefore, it will be very helpful and of immense value for these young adults, if in the future, the validation of competences would be recognized Europe-wide in order to place job-seeking in any type of career respectively back into the European workforce.
- It is useful for the counsellor to know a little bit about validation and how could this help a migrant or low skilled person.
- the case studies and practical exercises are particularly useful

### **What did you particularly dislike about the instrument?**

Some of the respondent pointed out that the tool should be implemented "in real life" and only after that we can recognize any missing gaps or smoothing running procedures. They point out that at this point it is hard to say what they dislike about the instrument.

Some disadvantages according to the respondents, can be summarized as such:

- The instrument demands a level of literacy from the clients that will make working with it very time consuming and expensive.
- Students who study to become counsellors or un-experienced counsellors need guidance of an experienced person to work with the products.
- The part of the instrument that works with the clients in a on to one situation needs to be less wordy and more user friendly as some of the clients would need more support in teasing out the information required to build up a portfolio of work experiences.

- The instrument is meant to deal with validation, but what the instrument is doing is related more to identification rather to validation (in relation to counselees` competences)

## INSTRUMENT

### **How did you find the overall structure of the instrument?**

Most of the respondents felt the structure was very good. They pointed out the instrument is easy to understand and easy to use. Some of them said that a thorough reading was necessary at the beginning, but after that it was pretty easy to work with.

### **Overall, how useful is the instrument in your field of activities?**

Most of the respondents felt it was very useful in terms of counseling and coaching migrants, immigrants and job seekers and it was a very helpful tool for self reflection.

A small percentage of the respondents who do not work with migrants felt it has its limitations in usability.

### **Do you think the instrument will allow career counsellors to better identify non-formal skills in job seekers?**

There was an almost unanimous agreement that due to the set up of the instrument it will allow counsellors in a much more productive way to support and assist job seekers (with non-formal education) in order to be placed into the global workforce

### **Do you think the instrument is a useful step towards future validation of these skills?**

*The respondents argued that it is going to take a while until non-formal skills are being validated but, yes, this tool will be very useful in the future.*

**How easy was it to prepare yourself for work with the instrument? How user friendly did you find it?**

Most of the respondents said it was easy, others had positive and negative comments regarding the user friendliness that can be summarized as such:

Positive:

- In general, the instrument and the guide are user friendly.
- For diploma students who are practitioners in career guidance and people applying for RPL in higher education the user guide is user-friendly: Easy to understand and with practical examples.
- The self-evaluation for counsellors is useful and good and at the same time complicated to work with.
- Experienced counsellors get new ideas on how to determine somebody's informal and formal competencies thus helping the client and themselves to process the job placement in a more sufficient and more expedite way.
- It is nice there are graphics, table checks, it is like a workbook.

Negative:

- Depending on the level of knowledge on validation processes the user friendliness varied among participants.
- The instrument is very long.
- The instrument requires that the client is together with a career counsellor through the competence identification phase, which makes it demanding to work with.
- The self-evaluation for counsellors is useful and good and at the same time complicated to work with.

- In a limited number of cases there was some resistance to the idea of validation (largely echoing the need for some for higher level training).

## USER GUIDE

### **How useful were the guidance material?**

Most of the respondents felt the User Guide was very useful and had clear explanations.

### **Any other comments about your experience of using the help and/or guidance materials:**

The respondents pointed out that user guides was very well set- up and informative, especially in the introduction part. It gave an overview of the organizations involved and their role and position in this particular tool and global economical position. Also it provided an educational background concerning the labor market, professions, economy crises and the recognition of the competencies

## ONLINE MOODLE PLATFORM

### **How useful do you think is the Back To Work online platform for accessing the products and sharing best practices and expertise?**

Most of the testers replied that the platform was a good idea and it COULD be very useful in a training process, however as it is now people will not have time

to go through all of the sections on the platform. The sectors could be useful but currently there is too much information and too many questions.

**Overall, how user friendly is the platform?**

While the content is well structured others felt it is a little too complicated - too much time is needed to read through the whole moodle platform and given information.

**Overall, how accessible are the products through the platform?**

It is accessible; the different topics are listed and can be found very easily.

One respondent couldn't get the materials from the platform

**Any other comments about the design and/or structure of the platform?**

None were given

## OUTCOMES

**What are the main benefits of using the instrument during the career counselling process?**

The instrument makes visible the client competences, helps him to give a value of his previous experience which is not always valorized in school/family  
 It is widely believed that the tool will definitely benefit both the counselor and client to get a better understanding for themselves and each other.

**What, if anything, will you change in the instrument?**

While some felt they would have to work with it for a while to answer that question, others pointed out potential improvements:

- It would improve the instrument if it was shortened, and if background, history and theoretical explanations were separated from the actual instrument containing suggestions and inspiration for practice.

- Maybe it would be easier to have two different instruments (written in two different language levels). Both instruments should have user guide insight.
- The language in the section which is related to the client in the instrument could be less abstract and more concrete and daily-life style.
- The language used in the document might be daunting for some clientele supported by the counsellor.
  
- It is not easy to understand from the beginning why a counsellor should do or prepare the validation. Maybe more information about this could be provided at the beginning.
- More information could be added about some abbreviations, to be explained more the benefits of validations related to other domains and how to be transferred.
- More exercises for counsellor and client, and also more study cases could be useful.
- More visuals, end notes, graphics needed.

### FINAL COMMENTS

#### **What other information/chapters would you like to see added to the instrument?**

Some additional information / chapters needed:

- Low qualification jobs competency profiles
- University courses (examples) we could gain with credits thought validation process

- Some pictures? I would have liked to have a note-book to download for using with a single client (where the client to write about his experiences and to register the competences)

**Would you consider using the instrument during the counselling process?**

Yes, both in counseling and research.

**Would you recommend the instrument to colleagues?**

Yes, everybody can learn and benefit from the international ideas and cooperation in this instrument, not only counselors working with migrants, but also for school counselors

**If you have any other comments about the instrument, please make them here:**

The partnership should carry on trainings for guidance counselors on using this instrument

**CONCLUSIONS FROM BACK TO WORK ONLINE TESTING AND FEEDBACK**

Most of the participants found the overall usefulness of the Back to Work products in carrying out counselling to be excellent because they felt they can easily use the instrument for validating their client`s non-formal/informal learning and it helped them in their self-development as a counselor.

While some found similarities with previous projects, which is not surprising as it is a Transfer of innovation project, others, particularly in Bulgaria, found it innovative for the national context

**Instrument**

Overall, the instrument was found easy to use and useful in terms of counseling migrants, immigrants and job seekers and it was a very helpful tool for self reflection. Preparation for work with it was also found to be easy.

Most of the respondents felt the instrument's main advantages lay in the provision of a guided approach to counselling of returning migrants and unemployed people and the aforementioned challenge to the counselor to revise, improve and implement his or her skills, knowledge and competencies.

Most respondents agree that it is early to realistically point out shortcomings of the instrument, but some disadvantages are that it demands a certain level of literacy from the clients and the part that deals with them needs to be more user friendly as it is a great level of support is needed from the counselor. This makes it demanding to work with.

Some respondents felt the instrument is quite long.

### **User guide**

Most of the respondents felt the User Guide was very useful and had clear explanations. The respondents pointed out that user guides was very well set-up and informative,

### **Moodle platform.**

Most of the testers replied that the platform was a good idea and it COULD be very useful in a training process, however as it is now people will not have time to go through all of the sections on the platform. The sectors could be useful but currently there is too much information and too many questions

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The instrument could be improved if it was shortened, and if background, history and theoretical explanations were separated from the actual instrument containing suggestions and inspiration for practice. More visuals, end notes and graphics are also graphics needed.

An idea to do this is to have two different instruments (written in two different language levels). Both instruments should have user guide insight.

The language used in the document might be daunting for some clientele supported by the counsellor. Even more, the language in the section which is related to the client in the instrument could be less abstract and more concrete and daily-life style.

It is not easy to understand from the beginning why a counsellor should do or prepare the validation. Maybe more information about this could be provided at the beginning.

More exercises for counsellor and client, and also more study cases could be useful.

### **Expected Impact**

Although the final version of the instruments has been ready for a very short time, we are witnessing prospects for real impact in the countries, most affected by the returning migrants phenomenon – Bulgaria and Romania. The Bulgarian National Labor Agency has agreed to distribute the products throughout all the public labor consultants and encourage them to use them. The Romanian partner reports progress in the cooperation with public bodies in Romania as well.