

BACK TO WORK - *Counselling returning migrants and unemployed*

The training session on the validation and recognition of knowledge and competencies of returned migrants and unemployed

Bucharest, 14th – 15th of June

1. OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITIES

The session held on the 14th and 15th of June in Bucharest represented the first opportunity in the framework of the project to present the progress of our work to the wider public of professionals in the field of career counselling from each partner country. The session was designed and planned keeping in mind the need for it to perform three key functions:

- a. Information and dissemination of the Back to Work intermediary results and products;
- b. Provide for a forum that would foster constructive exchange of views and best practices on the topic in general and receive feedback on the *Back to Work* products;
- c. Set the basis of a network of relevant stakeholders, representing both public and private sectors, based on a common understanding of the need to introduce new and innovative practices in their activities and on the willingness to use and help spreading the products of the Back to Work project.

In order to reach these objectives, we focused on the following priorities from the many pertaining to the organisation of such an event:

- Finalizing the first version of the *Back to Work* Instrument and User guide, given their prominence in the testing kit. The draft had been presented and discussed upon in the previous working meetings and via online communication channels, the final product was edited and printed out as a work support during the conference;
- Deciding on a framework of work that would support our highly interactive work flow. We opted for the *Open Space Method*, a large-group process that helps participants focus energy on issues or opportunities of interest, and collectively design appropriate courses of action. Open Space is a highly participative planning method in which participants self-organize around an agenda they create and manage. The process begins with a theme, usually in the form of a question for the group to address, but no particular outcome or solution is assumed in advance. Participants generate issues and topics, which become basis for discussion groups around which participants self-select. Finally, action planning groups convene around the final grouping of issues. With Open Space, people tend to be creative, synergistic and self-motivated.

	<p style="text-align: center;">BACK TO WORK- <i>Counselling Returning Migrants and Unemployed</i> LLP-LdV/TOI/2010/RO/023</p>	  Education and Culture DG Lifelong Learning Programme
---	--	--

- Defining the criteria for selecting the persons that would take part at the session. Given the fact that our intention was to have a group as representative as possible for the wide variety of stakeholders involved in career counselling, we decided on two main selection criteria: (i) experience in the field of validation and recognition of knowledge and competencies and/or with the target groups and (ii) the affiliation.

2. PREPARATION

ARCA – The Romanian Forum for Refugees and Migrants, as the partner organization responsible for hosting the testing session, was in charge of most of the tasks pertaining to the planning and organising of the event. From a technical point of view, we contracted the venue for the event and for accommodating the participants, along with the printing services for the testing kit.

For the participants, especially the Romanian one, we identified the following target-groups:

- (1) Representatives of the main official institutions that deal with labour counselling and labour force mobility;
- (2) Representatives of the centres for the evaluation and certification of professional competencies, both public and private;
- (3) Relevant representatives of the civil society (trade unions, NGOs).

This was therefore the framework we kept in mind, when choosing whom to invite at the direct testing session, being aware that, in order for the instrument to be effective, it has to be introduced to different public and private interests, so as to encourage further cooperation between them and increase the potential of the tool.

We prepared the necessary documentation for inviting and selecting the participants to the testing, both Romanian and from the other partner countries. While the documentation was available for all the partners to use, each of the partners were responsible for selecting the participants from their own country (except Denmark). ARCA drafted the invitation, a presentation of the project (including an indicative agenda) and a Participant's form via e-mail or fax to the selected institutions. The participant's form was particularly designed as to request information relevant to our selection criteria. As far as rejected applications, they are to be integrated in the programme at a later stage, when they will be encouraged to register on the online platform. The persons finally selected for the testing session covered all the target groups identified during the planning and organising phase.

A preparatory meeting between the partners took place a day before the event, where the final workflow was agreed upon, along with assigning to each partner tasks and responsibilities during the event.

Each of them acted as moderators of the discussion of the learning-café (the work unit of the Open Space Method), along with the other responsibilities assigned to the post (debriefing, note taking, etc.)

3. THE TESTING SESSION

Taking into account the set objectives and the training concept considered fit for the testing session, the meeting was designed as to revolve around its main core – *the learning-café*. It is exactly what the words imply: a café environment and time for the group to do its business. There is literally nothing here at the start. For our session, the learning cafés consisted of 6 coffee-like tables. Each table (learning café) was a place where the each partner, acting as a facilitator, was the host and shared his thoughts, experiences and knowledge on a specific topic with no more than 6 café guests/trainees/participants. The idea of such a setting was to ensure that the guests of a café will have time to analyse and discuss the most important issues raised by the host of the café in a relaxed and stimulating environment.

The topics/questions that were proposed by the facilitators for each of the *learning-café*s were chosen based on their relevancy for the topic of career counselling in general and the objectives of the *Back to Work* project in particular. More practically, they would consist of a starting point for bringing together different framework of understanding of the topic and ways of working with it, especially since the participants to the testing session came from all the 6 partner countries. Therefore, we envisioned these questions as an indicator of the degree of homogeneity in practical terms between different national labour counselling systems, which is essential for the final drafting of the *Back to Work* User Guide and Instrument. Moreover, the answers to these questions would indicate where adjustments to the Instruments should be made. They were focused on the meaning of concepts like competencies, but also on very practical aspects of counselling returning migrants and unemployed, encouraging sharing of good practices and work experiences, or identifying current problems and solutions to them. These topics/questions are the followings:

1. What is your understanding of competencies?
2. How can you work with criteria for validation and assessment of competencies?
3. How can you document/present evidence of (real) competencies?
4. Which competences do counsellors need to work with validation (VPL)/ recognition (RPL)/ assessment of prior learning (APL)?
5. What should the ideal instrument for the validation of prior learning contain?
6. What would be the best process when working with client's competencies?

	<p>BACK TO WORK- <i>Counselling Returning Migrants and Unemployed</i></p> <p>LLP-LdV/TOI/2010/RO/023</p>	  Education and Culture DG Lifelong Learning Programme
---	--	--

❖ *Learning-Café #1*

Participants presented their position on this question in simple words - “*what I can do*”, “*things obtained through education, life that make you good in what are you doing*”, but also by using concepts such as: abilities, skills, knowledge, performing actions in an autonomous way. There also seems to be a hierarchy between the latter for some: the path that leaves from knowledge goes through skills as to develop into competencies, provided that there is a willingness to actually implement and make the best out of the competencies; so attitude as well is a key-component of the meaning of the word.

Based on these answers, we can affirm that the meaning of the word *competency* is homogeneously perceived/ understood by the participants; therefore, this concept should not raise any issue of interpretation or translation.

❖ *Learning-Café #2*

In order to make a success of guidance and counselling, it is important to collect as many pieces of information as possible, as it can help counsellors take a global look at the problem and offer meaningful guidance, that takes into account not only the needs set by the counsellor solely, but also the conditions relevant to the client. The interview was suggested as a good technique for getting in-depth information that could otherwise not be obtained. It can help us understand the needs and based on the needs we can then organize a set of criteria. A key issue that was raised pertained to the question of who sets the criteria; and the need for it to be flexible enough as to remain relevant for all particular cases. Regardless of the method used to obtain the necessary information, there are minimum ethical guidelines that need to be taken into account when providing counselling services:

(I) Confidentiality: counsellors are mandated to maintain all matters arising during any counselling of a client confidential. All advice given should not in any way be disclosed nor discussed with another person.

(II) Tolerance. It is important that to practice tolerance with a client and unnecessary duress on the client is totally unacceptable. Request for counselling is voluntary and therefore is improper to force the services on a client.

(III) Objectivity. The need to be objective in counselling relationship is important. One needs to be impersonal in your dealing with the client, and be objective with his view, offer options that are clear and understood by the client, merits and demerits spelt out very clearly, so that the client is very clear of the kinds of decisions he/she is going to make. Counsellor’s views should not be imposed on the client – good practices.

	<p style="text-align: center;">BACK TO WORK- <i>Counselling Returning Migrants and Unemployed</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">LLP-LdV/TOI/2010/RO/023</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">Education and Culture DG Lifelong Learning Programme</p>
---	--	---

❖ *Learning-Café #3*

According to the participants, *real* competencies imply more than focusing on just occupations or experience, and rather more on the whole life, on the background a person has and how can he build on it, under the guidance of the counsellor. By tracking this background, the participants referred to a way to map the clients' summary of aptitudes, experience, potential and expertise; a mix between tools such as letters of recommendations (both formal – focused on hard skills component; and informal – self assessment of one's social environment and habits) and instruments with quantitative indicators (psycho-matrix, personality test, proof working).

There is of course no standardized method, but *thematic frameworks* can be developed, using exchanges on best practices as a starting point. These can help both counsellors and clients in overcoming frequent obstacles that appear during career counselling, such as: client's self under or over-assessment (I can do nothing/ everything), lack of self-confidence, language barriers. The flexibility of such frameworks can also address problems faced by the counsellors, as organisational and policy issues, but, more importantly, assist them in the task of helping *"the clients in overcoming their fear of failure and having to compete with others in helping them to undergo a transformation process they will be more open to face life's changes and this will enable them to move on with their lives and reach their goals. Thus, they retrieve a more positive outlook on live and make them a happy person being a hero to their kids"*.

❖ *Learning-Café #4*

When working with assessment, recognition and validation of prior learning, the participants identified a set of competencies that, in their opinion, each counsellor should have in order to perform his job adequately. On the one hand, they refer to hard knowledge, such as recognized qualification certificate for assessment of prior learning, ease of using certain tools, such as psycho-metric tests (RO), Holland's interest test, ProfilePass (DE), and last, but not least, always following the set quality standard when performing their job. On the other hand, a full range of soft skills were laid out: ability to reach out to the client so that to nurture a feeling of mutual trust, essential for being able to discover the client's story about himself, so as to have a picture of client's objectives and perception of himself. There were also a set of competencies at a more practical level: matching clients' competences with adequate jobs, conditioned by having a good intuition about the position a person could occupy, but also on having good contacts with enterprises and persistence in helping clients in their contact with authorities, often too bureaucratic to facilitate a person's employment.

	<p style="text-align: center;">BACK TO WORK- <i>Counselling Returning Migrants and Unemployed</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">LLP-LdV/TOI/2010/RO/023</p>	
---	--	---

❖ *Learning-Café #5*

Firstly, such an instrument would be efficient if the specific tasks of the counsellors, the specific tasks of the evaluator of competences and the steps on how the counsellor could and should prepare/transfer the client to the evaluator/evaluation centre were clearly mentioned, along with a definition and clarification of counselling and validation, as concepts and processes. They mentioned that counsellors should have very good communication and social skills, to be a very good emotional intelligence, in order to ask the beneficiary the right questions and to find the competences which could be validated. A self-evaluation questionnaire with some hints after the interpretation, which could help the counsellor to perform better, could therefore be included.

One suggestion regarding the interaction between the counsellor and the client was to include a semi-structured interview, based on the CV, which would help identify the competences of the beneficiaries which might have been overlooked; the information gathered in this way could be used to develop a comprehensive career plan.

For the three specific domains that are of relevance for *Back to Work* (social services, construction and industry), the instrument should contain a list with the general and specific competences (if applicable) that clients should have in order to be transferred to the proper evaluation centre. As far as the latter is concerned, it should also be included in a list of all the evaluation centres in social services, construction and industry, from all project partners countries.

❖ *Learning-Café #6*

The German participants gave the example of the tool called *Profile Pass*, a questionnaire, adapted for under and over 25 years old persons, which is used to gain the profile of the clients.

The other participants imagined the process as composed of different stages. The workflows suggested were more or less similar and included the following steps

1. *An introductory phase:* it would serve to establish a professional connection between the counsellor and the client, with clearly specified rules of conduct; but, on the other hand, would also create a comfortable and trustworthy environment for the client.

2. *Identifying the strong and weak points of the client:* the discussion should be honest and based on an emotional agreement, and the counsellor should use his soft skills to build his client's confidence in himself and his abilities. It is a step where counsellors should do their best to find out the objectives of the client.

	<p style="text-align: center;">BACK TO WORK- <i>Counselling Returning Migrants and Unemployed</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">LLP-LdV/TOI/2010/RO/023</p>	
---	--	---

3. *Undertaking an action plan* that would identify the objectives and the best possible courses of action to reach them, maybe in the form of a portfolio of competences (to be acquired through formal/informal learning, developing soft skill). This would be a highly interactive process, with involvement from the behalf of the client, who would recognize himself his areas of development.

4. *Reflective accounts*, consisting of several sessions, where the plan would be re-evaluated against the progress undertaken by the client, so as to take into account any development, until the client would consider that his targets have been reached.

❖ ***Direct feed-back on the instrument***

Alongside the topics from above, the instrument developed in the *Back to Work* programme were presented to the participants, who were encouraged to provide their feedback, considering their actual experience in using daily different tools for their.

On the one hand, discussing the instrument was an occasion for reflection on the process of counselling. Counselling was thought of as a process in which the helper expresses care and concern towards the person with a problem to facilitate that person's personal growth and positive change through self-understanding; therefore, a learning-oriented process which usually occurs in an interactive relationship with the aim of helping the person learn more: about the self; about others about situations and events related to given issues and conditions and also to learn to put such understanding to being an effective member of the society. Vocational guidance is a process of helping individuals to choose an occupation, prepare for, enter into and progress in it. It plays its part by providing individuals with a comprehension of the world of work and essential human needs, thus familiarizing individuals with such terms as 'dignity of labour' and 'work value'.

Guidance and counselling are two sides of the same coin. The goal in both cases is to give an opportunity for an individual to see a variety of available options and thereafter, assist the person in making a wise choice. Guidance is the process that is put in place at a time a choice is to be made. Counselling on the other hand i) helps with considering all sides of a potential choice even before the choice is made; ii) takes place when a choice has been made and there is a need to modify, reinforce or abandon such a choice. The instrument needs to serve or relate to both.

The instrument needs to focus upon helping the individual to cope with development tasks such as self-definition, independence, and the like. Attention must be given to clarifying the individual's assets, skills, strengths, and personal resources in terms of role development. For data collected to be useful, the instrument should be valid and reliable.

	<p style="text-align: center;">BACK TO WORK- <i>Counselling Returning Migrants and Unemployed</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">LLP-LdV/TOI/2010/RO/023</p>	  Education and Culture DG Lifelong Learning Programme
---	--	--

On a more practical level, there were many suggestions made on the language used in the instrument, which should be reconsidered in order to make it more accessible. Very specifically, *hobbies* should be rephrased using what *do you enjoy doing outside work*, the negative meaning of some words, like *argue*. There are also sentences and questions which are dominated by concepts and abstract/academic terms which might be hard to understand by low skilled unemployed and returning migrants. Not to mention that they would not fit to their background, but rather for more educated and better prepared persons, that would not necessarily have problems in finding a position. A distinction was proposed to be introduced, between manual and literacy skills.

There were also opinions that the instrument is too long and needs to be more contextualized and shorter; otherwise, it would not be efficient in a person-to-person conversation/interview. It should be aimed at clients too, not only at counsellors or evaluators, and the list of competences should be revised heavily and simplified for the direct use of the client to fill in. On the other hand, the questioning would not be only for self-completion, the client should base himself on the support of the counsellor, who could place the questions in context for him. Furthermore, it was added that, when revising the instrument, it is important to take into account that validating/assessing bodies and practices are different in different countries and to explain how the instrument might be useful for example for both career counsellors and for evaluators, as well for the clients, in different circumstances.

The overall impression is that the instrument as an entity is good, and that it can perform its function of providing for a diagnosis, provided that the necessary modifications are made in order to make it more user-friendly. One suggestion would be to add a glossary of term/explanation of terms used to the instrument or the user guide. Adaptation could be with minimum modification. The direction of modification is in the areas of degree of fit with the test blueprint, cultural bias, and length.

PLEASE SEE HERE A SHORT VIDEO TAKEN TO THE OFFLINE TESTING SESSION, JUNE 2012 BUCHAREST

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=QhloqMEvwcc