

Using the focus group method to determine the adults’ needs for continuous professional development

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Abstract

The new global lifelong learning policy adopted by all states concerned with the evolution of society is currently based on broad debates in order to identify common points and actions capable of meeting the current challenges. The aim is to provide to all the people, equal opportunities to adapt to the requirements of socio-economic changes and to get involved directly in shaping their future. Continuous professional development designates the most “technical” component of adult education, including mechanisms and structures requiring important material resources (the state is one of the most important partners in funding) and specialized human resources specifically for this area, aiming various forms of professional training of adults (professional training/retraining, professional development, reorientation, professional reconversion, etc.). Specific strategies are designed and systematically organized and planned content is isolated; institutions offering such programs are highly diverse (independent specialized professional training centers as well as affiliated centers / structures in partnership with government institutions responsible for professional activity or education, economic agents as well, specialized departments of universities, etc.). Romania has adopted the revised European Employment Strategy, the key instrument for coordinating the employment policy priorities at EU level, with employment policy being in line with the objectives and guidelines of this strategy. The measures and actions in the national employment strategy are in line with the guidelines of the European strategy. Unfortunately, Romania’s gaps in the EU-25 are impressive. Increasing discrepancies are found in the low performances we record with the labor force compared to the EU member states. What is worrying, however, is the increase in youth unemployment, which leads to tensions in the labor market. The incidence of long-term ILO unemployment among young people has increased significantly, with a negative impact on rural areas. The most serious problem at this time is long-term unemployment. In order to cope with the competitiveness that is now announced in services area, it will be necessary to change attitudes, customer-oriented behavior of employees, which means better organization of work and adequate training to provide quality services to clients more and more educated and demanding.

FOCUS GROUP: “Developing Entrepreneurial Skills through Exercise Companies to Increase Social Inclusion and Equal Opportunities in the Labor Market”

1. Introduction

The issue of continuing education, through courses offered by educational institutions or firms that are specialized in adult education, is as present and pressing, so neglected between managerial preoccupations. The small number of studies in this area, as well as the initiatives of the authorities, demonstrate this. However, the increased concern for adult continuous training is also reflected at European level.

The study focuses on the possibilities of increasing the chances of young people or adults to find a job after graduation or qualification courses (the actors involved being the students of the Virgil Madgearu Business School), but also on equal opportunities from the perspective of all the actors involved: unemployed people in Galati, Tg. Bujor, Berești, Tecuci, managers with

which the Economic College has partnerships, people from Agency for Employment in County of Galati, Labor and Social Protection Directorate.

This research is intended to analyze several categories of people who will participate in the focus group:

- The views of students or adults involved in the study, about continuous training;
- The level of knowledge of interviewees about labor legislation and institutions that support continuous training and equal opportunities in the labor market;
- Ideas to improve working relationships from the perspective of the actors involved.

2. Research methodology

The aim of the research was to train and diversify the entrepreneurial skills of students through modern interactive methods simulating the real economic environment, in order to “sell themselves” better on the labor market and/or to develop a successful personal business as a small entrepreneur.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- Providing students with the skills to interdisciplinary relate specific knowledge and apply financial and economic rules and regulations through the opportunity to work in a protected environment to increase their social insertion at the completion of studies;
- Practical training of pupils in an integrated work environment by simulate the economic and social realities in order to increase graduates’ adaptation to the job description requirements for a future job;
- Improving the interpersonal communication skills of students, increasing their empathy and tolerance by setting individual roles in the project team, working and making decisions together and negotiating conflicts to increase self-esteem and job opportunities for graduates after graduation;
- To inform pupils in the field of free-business activities by studying the general and particular trends existing on the labor market, by knowing the labor legislation and by developing business plans for each newly established company;

Other possible objectives to be achieved through the market study, by cooperation with state institutions involved in the actual research carried out within the framework of the school development project are:

- promoting an inclusive approach by employers to disadvantaged young people;
- helping to inform and raise awareness among the community (especially employers) of equal opportunities and non-discrimination on the labor market of disadvantaged young people;
- helping to increase the quality of professional integration services offered to disadvantaged young people.

The qualitative approach was aimed at developing a focus group with the students involved in the exercise firms and 20 in-depth interviews with people subjected to various forms of discrimination: gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation that were currently engaged in re-qualification courses, paid unemployed who re-qualified themselves in the sales area of food and non-food products who have expressed their desire to be informed about the concept of an adult exercise firm.

Selection of subjects

Participants were selected by employment status. The study was attended by students from exercise firms, people who are not currently working that are paid unemployed, managers with whom the school institution collaborates. The areas from which the unemployed subjects come are diverse. A set of 12 questions was used for a 2-hour meeting.

Opening questions: "Tell us who you are, where did you hear about continuous training and the exercise firm and what do you like to do more when you do not work"; introductory questions: "How did you discover this concept?" transition questions: "Think about when you first had contact with training?"; "How was the adaptation process for you?"; key questions: "What specific chapters, from the courses / modules, helped you most?", "What part from this course do you consider most difficult?"; closing questions: "We want to find out how to improve these services. Is there something you would have expected to say here, and you did not have the opportunity to do this? "

3. Analysis of the data and conclusions of the study

- Most people appreciate that the labor market in Galati is growing and that there have been significant changes in terms of both the qualities of demand and offer.
- All the persons who participated in the study concluded that the labor market in Galați improved its quality over the last two years. Nobody expects major changes in the short term.
- Managers, people involved in adult education, trainers, have other opinions than focus group participants. As far as practical aspects are concerned, 90% of employers consider that graduates are not sufficiently practically prepared at the time of graduation. Only 10% of employers consider graduates to be sufficiently trained from the practical point of view when finishing their studies.

Causes: Lack of theoretical knowledge - 10.34%; Poor practical training - 22.41%; Youth instability - 27.58%; Immaturity - 25.86%. Other reasons include: the length of time the employee is trained, the reduced resistance to stress, the reduced resistance to hard and long lasting work.

Obviously, employees see improvements in terms of job offers and working conditions, wages, bonuses, especially in large foreign companies, but not as substantial as employers think there are.

- Adult subjects do not make a strict distinction between criteria that should be the basis for recruitment, paying or promotion. They are often the same for all three processes, or they have same significance. The two key terms that define these criteria, from the respondents' point of view, are involvement and efficiency. Adults want a safe job that does not require much effort, and the newly graduates are prepared to face the intense effort, the appetite for self-improvement, but, most important, to become "their own masters".
- Thus, if the efficiency is a more or less quantifiable criterion, the involvement also includes a strong emotional part, which is very difficult to be conducted by the management team and which seems to be reduced to the "general impression" that the manager seems to think about employee. Managers define employee engagement either through behavior towards customers or job itself, or by their capacity of team working. Employees define engagement through the constant "zeal" they have to show at work.
- Adults agree on the employee status because of the scarring idea of becoming an investor at an advanced age. Adults are more serious and loyal to a company that treats them reasonably but without giving them raising opportunities. Employee efficiency is defined by interviewees either by the amount of professional knowledge the employee has, plus the pleasure of working in an offering job. Managers' cash resources for remuneration of personnel are limited, so most of them rely on the fact that besides knowledge, employees should not lack the passion for the specific domain they want to work.
- The way the subjects value the two indicators varies with age. Efficiency is greatly appreciated by older managers or acting in companies well-established on the market. The degree of involvement seems to be essentially valued by young managers or working in new firms on the market. New firms on the market prefer that after the formation of a "hard-core" team of specialists to complete their staff with young people with less practical experience, but with certain personality qualities that allow them to identify themselves with the company, with the its

goals and culture. Most senior companies on the market prefer that each new employment has to be made on the basis of efficiency and on know-how.

- Active employment measures, as a systemic tool for stimulating employment, will consist of an integrated package of activities leading to raising the chances of integration into the labor market of the target groups through personalized programs or a vocational guidance and counseling group; work mediation services; training to facilitate the access of unemployed people to job vacancies and to increase the number of qualified people in the labor market (vocational training services may be initial, qualification, training, re-training, specialization); counseling and training to get into a business in order to promote entrepreneurship and create new jobs as well as entrepreneurial training. All these actions will have an important cross-sectional component of ensuring equal opportunities for women and men.
- Generally speaking, it is possible to talk about the improvement of the working environment in large companies, both because of the specialized human resource management (according to Western models, which are usually introduced with the foreign investment) and to increasingly be aware of the fact that good working relationships guarantee business success, in the opinion of interviewed managers. Most of the employees of private foreign companies present in focus groups confirm this, being generally satisfied with working conditions and increasingly active as labor market actors (in each of the focus groups there were at least 2 people with active criticism, people who not only knew their rights very well but proved they had some partnership relation with the employer).
- The incentives used by most interviewees to motivate employees are cash rewards, often obtained by employees on performance criteria, then a kind of moral rewards: "Thank You!", the recognition of merits, and eventually some organized parties, access to the fitness room, swimming pool, weekend excursions organized by the company. The latter are rarely encountered but well received by employees, in general.

The main reasons why about two-thirds (or 66%) of the investigated companies did not organize training programs for their own employees are:

- the management of companies is satisfied with the level of employee training _____ 48%
- the specific skills can be taught directly at the workplace _____ 26%
- insufficient resources _____ 12%
- could not postpone the activity of employees who should have attended courses _____ 7%
- the lack of providers of local training _____ 5%
- other reasons _____ 2%

• Group discussions and in-depth interviews prove that equal opportunities issues in the workplace are very poorly visible and therefore in very few places they are on the priority list of management team.

• For Managers, Human Resources Managers and Union Leaders, the most important human resource issues are the ready-made workforce coverage for available jobs.

• Unanimously, the persons interviewed in the focus groups consisting in unemployed employees believe that on the Romanian labor market, the 40 years old women and above have the poorest chances to get and keep a job.

• From the leaders' point of view, the criteria for evaluating the people's chances on the labor market are the following: age, experience, competence, studies. In other words, although theoretically all admit that studies and professional experience should guarantee everyone a job, the reality that most of those interviewed in the focus groups depends on everyone's chance (the luck of getting a job meeting the level of specialization) and on profit needs (most managers do

not yet have HR management strategies, do not resort to specialized consultancy, they work in this area convinced by the phrase "no one is irreplaceable" and therefore are not yet very capable of managing the human capital of the companies they run).

- The two perspectives (of managers and former employees) are contrary. While managers think that people have equal chances of employment and professional development, most of their employees are talking about their own experiences or knowledge that contradicts this perspective. The frustration generated by inequities observed in the labor market is higher among the interviewed employees who have a low level of training or skills and advanced age. In fact, inequities are especially felt when they refers to themselves. That is why some discriminated categories of people on the labor market are relatively unobserved by the unemployed interviewed.

- Very few differences were observed between the views of the managerial staff and those of the employees on the categories of people discriminated against on the labor market. The problems of these categories of people in terms of insertion into the labor market are often neglected by the majority. Even though each participant knows some examples, the general attitude is delimitation from these people and their problems.

- Most of the people consider that exclusion, self-exclusion in their organizations is due only to the psychic traits of certain individuals, so-called "shy people". In fact, group discussions have revealed that these shy people could be people with special needs (certain physical handicaps).

- Solving problems generated by continuous training does not often depends on employees. The reasons are, on the one hand, the lack of information about the institutions, organizations that could help them and, on the other hand, the low financial resources of those people. The management team of small or medium-sized companies rarely solves these issues, and more rarely in specialized interviews, as a strategy for preventing such problems. From their discourse, these issues either "do not exist" or are treated as something not important and cannot be an major concern for them.

- Irrespective of the position they occupy in the company, interviewees are aware of the labor law. Human resources managers are confident that the information contained in the collective labor agreement is known to employees, and employees have developed over the past few years individual strategies for selecting information of interest. Large private companies are concerned with the quality of information in the field of labor law that reaches the employee.

- Most interviewed leaders show their interest in information and education. In fact, most people do not know about the existence of the non-profit NGOs and have not requested human resource firms consultancy. From this point of view, union leaders are at the greatest distance from such an approach. In general, besides discussing limited work problems, between friends or family, that can give some solutions, there are no other solutions to these problems.

- Although they are informed, two types of attitudes are revealed in the groups of unemployed people studied: a resigned one, among older employees - "you must be content with what you have ..." and a reactive one (almost utopian) - among younger employees who do not have much to lose (apart from the current job) if they claim their rights.

- As far as institutions that support equal opportunities are concerned, the less visible the problem is, the less well-known institutions capable to solve these problems are. Those who have heard of their existence do not know how they can be contacted or how they work.

- The National Council for Combating the Discrimination is almost unknown by the persons participating in the study. They are all convinced of the usefulness of such an institution, but they do not know how they can use the services of this institution. All this is due to the low awareness of the newly established institution and, above all, to the fact that people do not know such cases of discrimination solved through this institution.

- The lack of information can lead to conclusions like: "Personally, I do not think there is (or there was) such discrimination in Romania - it has not happened to me and I have not heard anyone."
- Although very few of the subjects can give examples of legislative measures in equal opportunities domain, continuous training or trade law, most tend to believe that this area is well regulated.
- Civil society should be an important factor in modernization, particularly through professional foundations and associations or other types of non-governmental organizations. The effort of these institutions is sometimes rewarded with outstanding results, sometimes only an inefficient consumption of resources.
- As of discrimination at the workplace, the overall conclusion of the study is that the issue is poorly visible, it is in fact ignored by both leaders and employees whose priorities seem to be different. That's why everyone agrees that information, education in this area is absolutely necessary. In fact, interviews have brought subjects to the attention of people that they do not usually talk about.

4. Results of the evaluation of message proposals

Study participants were asked to evaluate a set of courses that could be communicated in the Continuous Training Program using the exercise firms' method. The messages in the table below were evaluated on a scale of 1 to 10 depending on their relevance to the subjects of the study. The table shows the test results. The numbers represent the average of the grades obtained by each message. As it is a small number of interviewees (47), the figures in the table are only indicative, and they cannot be generalized to the whole population.

Communication _____	6.8
Business plan _____	6.9
Marketing _____	7.9
Accounting _____	8.1
Secretarial and Computer ____	7.2
Supply _____	7.6

- The most powerful courses were those that seemed heavier and are believed to be the best paid in the labor market. The weakest ones were generally considered courses that talk about "communication" and the importance of a business plan, which shows that adults do not really like the idea of a business, only young people being prepared for this idea, the term "exercise firm" is still vague for adult learners.
- The state or companies wishing to have a lasting activity should have the minimum standards of training of labor resources: basic education for all, minimum initial training, social and professional integration, civic participation, social cohesion, etc.
- Both employees, the unemployed and managers need to specialize in anticipation, contingency, communication, critical thinking, personal development, lifelong learning, and collective bargaining, coexistence in a multicultural environment, tolerance and solidarity.
- All actors involved in the labor market need to invest and want to shape the organizational culture, stimulate entrepreneurship, teamwork and risk-taking skills, as well as concern for quality that promotes productivity gains and competitiveness.
- Courses for managers and employees alike seem to them all the best tools to communicate about these things.
- Inclusion of the labor resources issue in all reform programs, regardless of the activity domain; this means that any program should take into account training, management, innovation, community development, civic participation, awareness, political socialization, lifelong learning, improving the quality of work and life.

- We need to consider the gain of adapting skills in an uncertain and problematic context, with a view to increasing competitiveness, employment and sustainable development capacities; ensuring continuous training in the perspective of a lifelong learning, covering both the professional dimension and political socialization and civic education.

5. Conclusion

Economic and social policies will prove effective if, in concrete terms, they will focus on:

- increasing the standard of living, prosperity by: increasing labor productivity, having a direct effect on raising the real salary level; granting social housing or facilitating the construction of housing for newly formed families; creating the possibility of maintaining a family through the work done by only one of the partners of the family couple;
- discouraging employers' tendencies to discriminate in the act of recruitment, barriers to women's access to certain jobs, especially future mothers or women with children; to make a change of attitude towards the role and function of women in general;
- the implementation of regional development programs with stimulating effects on the demographic level, the development of labor resources and the demographic security of Romania;
- extending the retirement age in order to counteract the negative consequences of the current economic dependence rate, the large number of people dependent on public resources;
- the gradual improvement of age structure of the rural population (aging phenomenon being more pronounced in these areas) and favoring its stability; avoiding the risk of work force decrease in these areas and rising unemployment in cities as a result of population migration from rural to urban;
- we consider the following measures: diversification of economic activities and employment opportunities; improving the quality of infrastructures and services, creating opportunities for personal development by increasing chances for access to education and improving the quality of educational services in rural areas, integrating the riffed population from industrial areas into a modern, efficient agriculture area on large surfaces; to stimulate a rental market that produces transfers for efficient land use by people with a capacity to work.

The following priorities have been identified for the development of continuing vocational training:

- Develop partnerships in continuing vocational training by promoting partnerships between public authorities, partnerships and other partners at central and local level, underpinning substantiation, development and implementation of continuing vocational training policies and strategies, involving an increasing number of employers in facilitating access to continuing professional training, including by assuring the necessary training resources, the involvement of social partners, especially employers' associations and professional associations, in the validation of qualifications, professional standards and continuous professional training framework programs, quality assurance of continuing professional training and assimilation of the European model of quality in continuing vocational training;
- Ensuring adequate resources for continuing vocational training; the costs to be incurred are to be regarded as investment needs and the following directives are important for increasing investment in continuing training: ensuring the legislative framework that finances continuous training, involvement of the social partners in this funding, attracting external finance, and expanding training providers.
- Facilitating access to continuing vocational training through the creation of close professional training opportunities as close as possible to beneficiaries, improving access to vocational training in rural areas, increasing the number of persons, looking for a job, including vocational training programs, expanding the network training of the adults, Employment Agency, modernization

and endowment of the existing centers, stimulation of the employees for the formation of their own staff in order to increase and diversify the professional competences of the employed persons and to monitor the evolving access to continuous professional training.

- Promote continuous professional training by promoting the benefits of continuing professional training, involving the media and social partners in promoting continuing vocational training and monitoring the implementation of the strategy for the development of continuing vocational training.
- Ensuring the quality of the continuous professional training system through the implementation of the non-formal and informal competency assessment and certification system, the creation of a national system for evaluation, training and certification of trainers, the introduction of innovative systems based on information technology, the implementation of the European quality assurance model.
- Training is seen as an individual responsibility, not as a company priority.
- Investing in training as a tool to improve the company's competitiveness is low in most companies in Romania.
- Employers are not willing to invest in training and do not make any investment in training, despite the fact that both employers and employees say that "theoretically" training is important - but only 1/4 of companies have organized information programs in the last three years. Companies consider training, even as a specialist, as an expense and not as an investment in human resources.

Promotion at work is regulated only in very few cases in enterprises that come with a Western organizational culture. In the rest of the enterprises, the employees are on the respective posts from the beginning to the end of the relationship with the respective company. It is actually promoted when changing the current job with something better in another enterprise. The incentives used by management are generally money, depending on the performance of the employees;

6. Trends in the Adult Training needs:

The tendency towards flexible, high quality employment, especially towards the service area, because:

- Breakthroughs are developed in new (market niche) areas with high demands on the level and quality of skills required,
- Breakthroughs tend to be practiced on a part-time basis or on a fixed-term contract,
- The higher the added value of the economic activity carried out, the more flexible the motivation of the employees through the flexible hours or the possibilities of reconciling the family life with the work.

There is a relatively low awareness of the content changes of the activity.

There are still many problems in Romania regarding the articulation of initial and continuing training. The initial training system does not recognize certificates obtained through the continuous training system as a follow-up credit. In general, there is no correlation between adult vocational training certificates and certificates issued by the national education system, and the partial certification scheme is inoperative. Under these circumstances, it is hard to talk about a joint training program.

Employers' attitudes converge with those of employees in terms of reduced interest or sometimes lack of any interest in continuing vocational training, except for those low-cost ways of doing what is indispensable. Employers are particularly pleased if they find an educated and well-trained workforce on the market and prefer the investment to be made by each individual, at their own expense and time, rather than at the time and cost of the enterprise.

It is necessary to increase the employment of the population through the following measures:

- Empowering employers to employ the unemployed from disadvantaged groups (long-term unemployed, disabled people, youths from children's homes);
- increasing the employment of women in certain specific sectors of activity;
- adopting a new law on employment and social protection for job-seekers;
- adopting a new legislative framework on employment and social protection;
- align labor law with European legislation on the protection of employees' rights in the event of the transfer of businesses, businesses or businesses and the protection of employees' rights in the event of the employer's insolvency;
- mainstreaming the principle of equality between women and men in all areas and at all levels of social life;
- the adoption of legislation guaranteeing women's right to physical and mental security and integrity and the elimination of all forms and manifestations of violence against women, both within and outside the family, the promotion of educational programs in the spirit of respect for human rights and democracy;
- social security reform through the transformation of the public pension and social insurance system, the private administration of the universal pension funds, the introduction of additional insurance;
- developing job-recovery services within the public pension system for socio-professional reintegration.

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