



PES to PES Dialogue Conference

“Quality management: professionalism of employment counsellors”

(Brussels, 17 – 18 April 2013)

Executive summary

Introduction

Quality assurance is one of the core themes of the PES 2020 Strategy Paper endorsed by HOPES in 2012. As well as on-going enhancements and individualisation of the service offer to job seekers, it involves a greater demand orientation and enhanced partnerships with other labour market actors, all with the goal of achieving sustainable and efficient activation and job matching. These priorities echo those of the Employment Package, which called on PES to ‘transform themselves into “transition management agencies” delivering a new combination of the “active” and “passive” functions.

Since its inception in 2010, the activities of the PES to PES Dialogue have emphasised the core role played by employment counsellors in achieving positive integration outcomes and effective resource allocation. They are the agents of the successful individualisation of pathways and allocation of suitable measures through the preparation and monitoring of tailored individual action plans. Similarly, they are responsible for ensuring the effective interaction with other providers and services. It is therefore on their competences - skills, knowledge and behaviours - that the frontline delivery of effective PES services depends.

The conference directly built on the [analytical paper](#) on job profiles and training for employment counsellors prepared in 2012. The paper showed that despite the diversity of business models and degree of diversification in the job profiles of PES counsellors, a common set of core competences for employment counsellors can be identified. These competences include interviewing and counselling skills, assessment and matching, networking, knowledge of labour market trends and regulatory requirements, as well as client orientation. The conference was attended by representatives from 22 PES, the European Commission, the European Lifelong Guidance Network and the academic community. Their discussions were guided by the three questions, as presented below.

Guiding question 1: Job entry - what are the key ingredients and aspects to be considered for recruitment and initial training of PES counsellors?

Employment counsellors need a set of core competences – in particular, the essential combination of both hard and soft skills, complemented by in-depth local and country-specific knowledge.

Client-orientation, problem-solving and other soft skills are particularly valued. It is therefore essential to identify candidates with – or at least the strong potential to develop - these skills at the entry stage. By contrast, the hard skills, such as IT skills, numerical ability and fluency in a foreign language, and PES-specific knowledge can be developed following recruitment, if needed.

A range of factors need to be taken into account when determining the entry-level requirements in a specific PES.

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to setting the entry-level requirements for employment counsellors. PES need to establish their criteria by taking account of the availability and quality of the labour supply; adequacy of the national education and training systems; relative pay, terms and conditions of employment; and recruitment legislation.

A number of PES operate within the regime of a general civil service recruitment process, which can limit their flexibility to recruit specifically for the employment counsellor competency profile. Greater emphasis therefore needs to be placed on 'shaping' the candidate to the role through the initial training.

PES need fit-for-purpose and flexible recruitment methods for the selection of counsellors.

Recruitment methods traditionally tend to emphasise individuals' academic and professional backgrounds, with the criteria sometimes extended to language requirements, ICT skills and relevant work experience. However, PES examples demonstrate how the effective use of assessment centres, psychometric tests and Simulation Recruitment Methods can help to capture applicants' capabilities and potential more broadly, in particular their soft skills which are so essential to the role.

The duration and design of initial training reflects the different educational attainment levels of recruits on entry across the PES.

Broadly speaking, the lower the level of educational attainment on entry, the longer the initial training offered. However, whatever the duration, initial training is best comprised of formal study/off-the-job training and on-the job learning/experience.

Initial training tends to concentrate on the development of hard skills and PES-specific knowledge, such as labour market intelligence, legal frameworks of entitlement and responsibilities, recruitment and Active Labour Market Policy options and performance management. The tailoring of this initial training to local labour market conditions can vary.

Mentoring and coaching are essential components.

The general logic applied by PES is that 'soft skills' are often acquired on-the-job over time, not necessarily - or to the same extent - through initial training. This is especially the case when soft skills development is supported by effective supervision and support from colleagues.

Mentoring and coaching are frequently highlighted as an important feature of both initial and on-going training, not only in terms of supporting the new recruit, but also helping to bring out the soft skills and attributes required of the job.

Viewed from the delivery side, in-depth knowledge and direct experience of the counselling job are key pre-requisites of competent mentors, coaches and trainers (as well as managers). Moreover, the role of mentor/coach can be an effective way of developing the career and maintaining the motivation of employment counsellors who are already very experienced in the job - particularly those who would like to progress professionally, but not directly into the echelons of management.

Guiding question 2: Continuing professional development (CPD) - what on-going learning and improvement processes are in place?

CPD is particularly important with regard to 'talent management' - bringing out the best of people in post and encouraging those with the greatest potential to progress.

Most PES have CPD provision in place, often framed as a minimum number of days training to be undertaken per annum. However, this criterion is seen as the bare minimum and should be supplemented by measures to frame and support CPD across the whole PES organisation. Good practice examples include competence profiles and personal development plans incorporated into structured and regular appraisal processes. Training should directly and explicitly reflect individual work situations, tasks and skill needs. The evaluation of CPD and learning gained should also be linked through to the review process - creating a 'virtuous circle.'

A range of CPD opportunities should ideally be offered in order to cater for different learning needs, contexts, styles and motivations.

Illustrations of CPD opportunities include a PES university; a rolling programme of seconding experienced PES staff to an in-house team of trainers; and blended learning – using a mix of practical experience and study including self-assessment and line manager assessment. Particularly effective on-the-job training includes mentoring and coaching, peer-to-peer learning and the use of case conferences. ICT and e-communications can also be used as platforms for effective learning and dissemination, including Intranets for Frequently Asked Questions, good practice modules and discussion fora. The European Social Fund is an important source of finance to support these initiatives.

Promoting CPD and its take-up by (busy) counsellors is essential and activities to support CPD include having a learning culture within the organisation (linking to the importance of leadership); a structured appraisal process; a career path for counsellors; offering mentoring and coaching; and formal and informal learning opportunities, including external accreditation.

Guiding question 3: Staffing concepts and leadership - what are the implications of a diverse client base and changing requirements?

Diversity management is a highly relevant issue, both in relation to staff and clients - a diverse cadre of staff brings added value if properly managed.

Examples of strategies used to manage a more diverse composition of staff included: talent management programmes to ensure senior management reflects the composition of the overall PES workforce; flexible working arrangements to ensure the retention of staff (and their skills) throughout their life cycle; on-going training in professional and soft skills (including personal effectiveness and coping skills), combined with effective appraisal processes can enhance retention, potentially reduce absenteeism and ultimately performance .

Effectively responding to a diverse client base can impact on sustainable activation / integration outcomes. Approaches adopted by PES include: training all staff to work with a diversity of clients; recruiting and training specialist staff; and partnering or contracting out specialist services. Diversity training is used by many PES; types of diversity training include awareness of cultural differences, assessment methods for groups with different abilities/needs, development of staff communication skills and how to handle aggressive behaviour. Recruitment strategies can also be used to ensure the PES workforce better reflects the client population.

Specialist PES counsellors can help to address the needs of specific groups.

Alongside training for all counsellors, PES can recruit or train staff for specialist functions, for example, working with young people, the long-term unemployed, individuals over 50, the disabled, minority groups or non-native language speakers, Roma, individuals with multiple issues (substance abuse, victims of violence) and so on.

Matching clients with specialist advisers can have local resource implications. For example, one PES illustrated how the use of a call centre meant that non-native

language speakers were able to access counselling in their own language regardless of location.

The value of leadership to maintain and improve the quality of frontline employment services cannot be underestimated.

Effective PES leaders – at all levels of PES management - require an in-depth knowledge of the 'business' of employment counsellors, as well as adaptable leadership skills. Furthermore, PES are organisations under pressure - demand for PES services are rising, their remit is changing and resources to meet needs are constrained. In terms of human resources, the potential negative consequences are loss of job satisfaction, increased stress and absenteeism, and low staff morale. In such circumstances, the role of PES leaders is essential to manage the demands of the service, whilst looking after the 'interests' of their staff.

Leadership action requires a focus both within and outside of PES.

Internally, leadership action to increase job quality and satisfaction includes setting the right tone and culture for the organisation, considering both structures (smaller teams) and job content (more variety), offering greater autonomy in personal goal setting for advisers, providing individualised development programmes, investing in managers as mentors, and offering horizontal career paths as well as vertical ones to provide a range of opportunities.

The leadership function also involves promoting the PES externally. Connections with the wider community of stakeholders, client and citizens to generate recognition of the work of PES and to celebrate success can motivate staff and generate pride and commitment in their work.

Challenges and the way forward

The conference highlighted several divergences and shortcomings, which would merit further consideration by PES as they move forward. Of particular note, PES have a marked diversity of entry requirements, initial training and CPD, which makes it difficult to immediately identify a common standard for the quality of personalised employment services. This includes concepts of how to professionalise soft skills, such as client orientation and problem solving. Moreover, some PES are bound by rigid civil service regimes, which hinders their ability to identify and recruit suitable candidates. And finally, diversity management is a topic that has not been fully examined, not only in relation to effective PES practice, but also in terms of establishing a common understanding diversity terms and concepts.

Looking to the future, there is a common interest amongst PES in developing the professionalism of employment counsellors and identifying shared practices in terms of job roles, competence requirements, training and human resource management. However, while there is broad agreement on the core competences required of PES counsellors, the development of a shared competence framework and a professional qualification requires further development. It is necessary to develop a more detailed specification of core competences and levels that could then be applied in the different contexts of PES recruitment, entry requirements and training.

More broadly, a comprehensive, fit-for-purpose core competence profile could sit as the focal point for a 'life-cycle' approach for employment counsellors from recruitment through to personal development and career planning. This would allow for the search for competent recruits, regardless of whether their skills have been acquired through education, training or work experience. It could underpin the career path of employment counsellors facilitating in-depth (professional) development, as well as hierarchical progression.

More information on the Dialogue conference is available [here](#).