

READY TO FACE THE FUTURE

A recent [CEDEFOP](#)¹ conference on *Guidance for Workforce Development*, held in Thessaloniki, Greece on 25/26 June 2007, discussed the changing paradigm for guidance services. While career guidance has in the past largely been reserved for labour market entrants and re-entrants (e.g. following a period of unemployment), changing economic, technological and demographic trends mean that ongoing career guidance, development and lifelong learning are increasingly vital for all of us if we are to face the challenges of economic change and restructuring. Innovative approaches developed by the EQUAL programme were [presented at the conference](#) alongside governmental, social partner and company-level initiatives. The overall aim of these presentations was to show how guidance can be brought closer to the workplace as a tool for preventing – or at least limiting – the negative impact of restructuring on individuals by allowing individuals to plan their careers and skills development pro-actively and on an ongoing basis. Around 120 participants worked for two days to discuss the following key themes:

- The role of Public Employment Services (PES) in guidance for the employed;
- The shift towards self-delivery and web-based guidance;
- Social partners initiatives on guidance and lifelong learning and specific support services for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); and
- Guidance for redundant and/or older workers.

Here, we provide a brief overview of the conclusions of these discussions.

RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE OF A CHANGING LABOUR MARKET

National governments and PES are beginning to wake up to the requirements of an ever changing business and technological environment requiring the ongoing adaptation of skills. While the role of national education strategies has traditionally been to prepare young people for the world of work (and this still remains an important priority), Member States are increasingly developing Lifelong Learning Strategies to take account of the need for adaptability among a workforce who can no longer either expect to perform similar tasks, or indeed stay in the same job throughout their working life.

Similarly, PES, which have traditionally tailored their guidance services around the unemployed or first-time entrants to the labour market, are having to adapt their services to develop active career guidance services for those in employment and for a different clientele of skilled workers, as well as for those with low levels of initial qualifications.

Although most career guidance continues to be publicly provided, in a number of countries contributions are increasingly being made by employers, as well as employees towards their ongoing career development and learning. SMEs and their employees often find it more difficult to access such services, which is a concern considering that SMEs form the core of the European Union (EU)'s economic dynamism. In addition, concern remains that the services provided by the PES are insufficiently employer-centred and their staff are too focussed on operational rather than outcome-based objectives.

ENSURING EQUAL ACCESS

As guidance services become increasingly focussed on individuals already in work, the method of delivery of such services becomes a more important issue. Flexible access during or outside of working hours is the key concern in this respect. A number of Member States, and social partner

¹ CEDEFOP is the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training

and voluntary organisations have therefore developed telephone or web-based services. One of the largest of such publicly provided guidance initiatives is Learndirect in the UK. Learndirect employs 200 advisors to provide career guidance and advice on training opportunities over the telephone. As well as offering services inside as well as outside of normal working hours, it caters for a diverse community by offering guidance in nine languages and advertising its services in ways most likely to target different ethnic groups within the community. Learndirect has been successfully marketed through the mass media and research has shown that 70% of those who call the helpline go on to pursue training.

Other career guidance and networking services utilise close co-operation with the trade unions to bring their advice closer to the target group in work places. As well as generally targeted provision, a “specialised” market has also developed, targeting particular sectors, occupations or groups (e.g. women). The use of “new media” such as the Internet is also critical to the further development of guidance services.

THE KEY ROLE OF THE SOCIAL PARTNERS

Particularly in relation to in-work guidance, the role of the social partners in developing career advice and lifelong learning provision is crucial. This was recognised by the cross-sectoral European social partners BusinessEurope, ETUC, CEEP and UEAMPE in formulating their 2002 Framework of Actions on the Lifelong Development of Competencies. An evaluation report on the implementation of the priorities of the Framework of Actions at national level shows that in most countries employers and trade union organisations are playing a more and more active role in the planning, co-ordination and delivery of such services.

A number of company-level examples presented in the CEDEFOP conference demonstrate that such active efforts often consist of a mixture of initiatives, combining the recognition of competences acquired on-the-job with formal and on-the-job training, and the ongoing discussion of personal career aspirations and training requirements. The latter is often done through an annual process of personal development planning. A representative of Nokia argued that workplace career guidance and development consists of 70% on-the-job training, 10% classroom-based learning and 20% mentoring, coaching and assessment. As well as the company’s own initiatives, a number of enterprises have chosen to contract out employee personal and career development services.

In addition to employers, many trade unions are offering guidance and learning services. In some cases, these are targeted at the most vulnerable groups and those threatened with redundancy, but there is also an increasing recognition that there is a delivery gap in the offer of such services, particularly towards individuals with a “medium level of skills”. In the UK “Union learn” has provided the resources to train 18,000 trade union counsellors working at regional and workplace level to provide guidance and promote lifelong learning opportunities. In Germany, the DGB’s “Life and Work” initiative also uses trade union representatives to provide coaching at workplace level. Increasingly, it is considered to be the role of trade unions to develop a culture of lifelong learning in the workplace; to improve access to guidance and learning; to remove barriers to accessing such services; to provide outreach activities; to increase confidence and motivation; and to negotiate with employers to set up workplace learning opportunities.

WORKING TOWARDS INTEGRATION

As well as emphasising the particular position and needs of SMEs in relation to the offer of career guidance and development, the conference discussed the requirements of older workers and those facing redundancy in more detail. There is an increasing awareness that early exit and responses to restructuring that emphasise early retirement as a “socially responsible” way of carrying out redundancies are becoming unsustainable in the context of demographic change. Early exit is also increasingly expensive in light of policy changes seeking to discourage the use of such an approach. But despite these disincentives to early exit, older workers continue to be significantly affected by redundancy. In addition, they often face barriers to re-entry into the labour market as a result of discrimination and often outdated formal skills and qualifications. The offer of ongoing guidance and lifelong learning is important to address and prevent the perception

of older workers possessing outdated skills and being less able to adapt to change and develop new capacities. This needs to be part of a lifecycle approach, but can be addressed in the short and medium term through the non-discriminatory offer of guidance and training provision and the recognition of skills acquired in the workplace. Several EU initiatives are under way in relation to the recognition of key skills and the provision of adult learning. The involvement of social partners in such initiatives is critical to ensure that such processes are recognised outside the confines of an individual employer and indeed one country.

The experience of EQUAL in assisting in adaptations to restructuring is highlighted in another [article](#). As well as the general presentation of lessons from EQUAL, conference participants also received a more detailed presentation on the EQUAL [MEIRG](#) project, which has developed successful approaches to the re-integration of redundant engineers into the labour market in the Midlands of the UK.

THE WAY FORWARD

There is now widespread recognition of the changing and important role played by ongoing career guidance services around the lifecycle, particularly in the context of accelerating technological changes and adaptations in business and service delivery. CEDEFOP will continue to emphasise these aspects in its new work programme. The experience of EQUAL can make an important contribution to this debate. For further details on the conference, why not visit the [website!](#)