

A 360 DEGREE VIEW ON THE ADAPTABILITY OF WORKERS AND COMPANIES

"Some companies are becoming machines for production - characterised by a growing appetite for efficiency and a leanness of workforce". With these words Dominique Lhuillier, social psychologist, describes the profound changes that have affected labour relations across Europe – particularly since the 1980s. The causes of this transformation are well known and include globalisation, increased competition, development of new technologies, and information and communication systems.

In order to meet these complex challenges, firms have devised a number of solutions. Among them, flexibility has acquired special attention and become one of the pillars underpinning companies' restructuring strategies today. But if flexibility seems to be the best solution for companies wishing to effectively manage change, what are the implications for different groups of workers within the labour force?



VAL.I's partners presenting the project during the showroom Gamma Donna

Increased flexibility does not always engender positive consequences for workers; it can lead to increased short-term contracts, reduced job security, increased workloads, faster operational schedules and rapid technological change. This situation can generate fragility within the workforce, with people becoming at risk of marginalisation, job insecurity and apprehension,

resulting in the impairment of their professional skills.

Bearing in mind these issues, the EQUAL VAL.I. project has developed an innovative system aimed at bringing a sustainable solution to the adaptability of both organisations and workers within the Piemonte region. The method used by VAL.I. is both unique and promising: it involves creating a new professional and social role, the 'business atmosphere advisor'. This mediator works directly inside enterprises on the ground with the aim of restoring trust and putting in place a new 'social pact' between employers and their employees. As Catia Pernigotto, project manager of VAL.I., explained: *"We approach the problems of the individual from a 360 degree angle. This means that we take into consideration the personal situation of the individual, as well as his interaction with colleagues and the employer. This comprehensive approach enables a clear definition of the individual's problems, and the development of a clear and targeted rehabilitation plan".*

The project is carried out by a variety of actors, each with substantial competences and skills: the project is managed by API (the association for small and medium enterprises) in collaboration with education, academic and training organisations, four enterprises, local public bodies, as well as one of the most important Italian trade unions, UIL. Thanks to this group of motivated partners, a comprehensive approach to developing the adaptability of workers and organisations in the north-west of Italy has been set up!

IMPROVING THE BUSINESS ATMOSPHERE: TEAMWORK AND SUSTAINABLE RESULTS

What are the characteristics of the approach set up by VAL.I.? What exactly is the method used by the project and who are the actors operating on the ground? In order to foster the adaptability of organisations and workers within Piemonte, the EQUAL project has set up an operational and comprehensive team composed by:

- Three territorial facilitators;
- Four 'business atmosphere advisors';
- A team of experts in specific areas; and,
- A secretary's office.

Each of these actors has a different role and function, but works with a team spirit to create synergies and obtain the finest results. Let's see what the tasks of each actor are...

The territorial facilitators (one for each province involved in the project) have a promotion function. This means that the basic mission of a facilitator is to interact with the businesses, detect the companies' needs and obtain their interest in participating in the project's activities. The facilitator's role is also to foresee the possible match between the needs of the local businesses and the services provided by VAL.I. During one or more meetings with the senior managers and HR managers, the facilitator explains in detail what the project is about, how the process works, as well as what results are expected. During these meetings, the facilitators also collect draft data about the situation of the firm. Ultimately, in case the organisation decides to use VAL.I.'s services, the facilitators also have the role of introducing the staff to the 'business atmosphere advisors', who will be responsible for the company. The facilitators have the difficult task of reaching VAL.I.'s final target: involving 40 companies and 800 workers in the activities of the project!

As Claudio Raiteri, from API, said: *"the role of facilitator is quite hard as it is often difficult to establish contacts with employers. They receive every day a number of offers from consultants or counsellors proposing disparate services. The facilitator has to convince them that VAL.I. is an innovative action, which will really make a change"*.

That said, the role of the 'business atmosphere advisors' is unique and can thereby be attractive to companies. This involves being a consultant or mentor to the company, taking the lead and accompanying the business through the process of change. But what are the actions undertaken by the 'business atmosphere advisors' and what is their working method?

The first thing that the 'business atmosphere advisors' do when approaching a company is to analyse the overall situation of the business organisation, as well as check the specific needs of each group (what are their concerns and how might they be addressed?). This research is done through direct surveys in the workplace, in-depth interviews with the staff and focus groups. Following this investigative phase, the 'business atmosphere advisors' set up a rehabilitation and intervention plan. This plan contains actions that are designed to foster the communication and trust within the workplace and, in the end, enhance the adaptability of the employees and the businesses. Examples of these actions are:

- assessment of the workers' competences (individually or collectively);
- set-up of a skills portfolio;
- evaluation of professional change opportunities;
- production strategy planning; and last but not least
- counselling on HR management and administration.

The intervention plan is successively shared and commented on together with the senior managers, HR managers and the workers.

As Raffaella Pasquale, social psychologist contributing to the methodological aspects of the project, put it: *"the importance of sharing the intervention plan with the organisation's staff should not be underestimated. Involving the beneficiaries has to be the pivot around which the development plan will be implemented. The 'business atmosphere advisor' is not a doctor providing pills to the patient, but more someone helping and supporting the empowerment and self-development of the business organisation"*.

The 'business atmosphere advisors' can also signpost the company to external services provided by other consultants or experts chosen from a 'catalogue of professionals' working within the

region. This is done to fill in any possible gaps and foster the synergies between the project and the actors available on the ground.

The other two figures in the operational team set up by VAL.I., the team of experts in specific areas and a secretary's office, have a role in supporting the 'business atmosphere advisors' and the facilitators. The three experts are consulted on an ad hoc basis when their competences in specific subjects are needed. The counsellor works with employers to reduce the gap between their skills or the requirements of the company, and the labour market, the HR expert acts to enhance the added value and valorise the input of HR staff within a company, while the expert in business strategies supports the enterprises in the process of adaptation to the market changes. As far as the secretary's office is concerned, this involves providing a back-up and coordination role: it entails supervision of the work of the facilitators, the 'business atmosphere advisors' and the experts, as well as managing a free information line set up to give the companies more information concerning VAL.I.



VAL.I's partners during a seminar in Alessandria

As Adriano Bergonzo, one of the four 'business atmosphere advisors', says: "*VAL.I. is for me an important challenge, but I know that I'm supported in my daily work by a strong and competent team*".

In other words: setting up an effective team and stimulating good synergies on the ground, that's what changes innovative ideas into successful and sustainable practices! More than this, the innovative mentoring and counselling method proposed by VAL.I. stimulates corporate social responsibility insofar as it benefits for all the stakeholders within an organisation.

The enterprises participating in the project have already expressed their enthusiasm towards this new professional figure and coaching method. Maria Rosa Viola from BIOS, a social economy enterprise, said: "*We think that the 'business atmosphere advisors' can bring benefits to our working environment as they give a fresh perspective on the problems and needs of all the staff. Reading the company's situation coming from inside can be biased or not completely neutral*". In other words, the work with the 'business atmosphere advisors' is considered to be a good occasion to "*slow down for a moment, think about the enterprise and understand what the problems inside and outside the company are*".

The counselling model will also be tested on two local public bodies (the communes of Alessandria and Casale Monferrato) to see how the 'business atmosphere advisors' work within a public context. - an issue that the partners particularly wish to explore. As Flavio Ceravolo, from the Piemonte University, said: "*the diversification of the testing ground is very important for the development of the 'business atmosphere advisor' method as it enhances its transferability in different contexts and workplaces*".

EXPLORING THE ROOTS: WORKERS, EMPLOYERS AND THEIR NEEDS

The approach designed by VAL.I is very pioneering and comprehensive. The process that led to this design is in itself innovative and will certainly contribute to the sustainability of VAL.I's results. It therefore deserves to be mentioned that the project's first year has been dedicated to extensive research on the ground in order to acquire an in depth knowledge of the real needs of companies and workers. Aside from the desk research, the partners have also set up direct contacts with enterprises (some of them being also active within the partnership), and organised interviews with more than 100 companies of the Piemonte region, as well as four focus groups.

The overall aim of this background research has been to get a clear picture of the most common problems encountered within companies and affecting the relations between employers and employees. How is the work place perceived? How individuals compare the past and foresee the

future? How might problems be tackled? And also, what do individuals think about their responsibilities and tasks within a company?

All of these questions were explored by the four above-mentioned focus groups, organised in terms of the participation of:

- social economy enterprises (1st focus group);
- human resources representatives from companies in 'at risk' sectors (2nd focus group);
- employers of different companies (3rd focus group); and
- psychologists and social science specialists (4th focus group).

The focus group method enabled the emergence of the emotional perception of the workplace, as well as the definition of the needs, expectations and ways of thinking of the specific groups. The focus groups also provided a solid foundation for the elaboration of VAL.I.'s action strategy. For example, the workers put forward the lack of acknowledgment of their personal efforts and contribution to the company as being the most important and common problem encountered. Other problems related to the heavy work periods and conflict amongst colleagues. The workers also outlined several emerging desires, such as the need to have more time for the family, improve communication between colleagues, as well as be professionally recognised by one's employer. From the companies' perspective, HR and senior managers mentioned the difficulty of introducing changes and developing good relations and communication with the employees and clients.

Based on the results of the focus groups, VAL.I. has designed a targeted and comprehensive action strategy presenting a number of innovative actions:

- development of a new professional and social role (the 'business atmosphere advisor');
- active contribution of both workers and employers to, what was called, "rehabilitation and intervention plan" for companies;
- involvement of social partners deployed on the ground; and
- development of synergies with the consulting and support services already existing in the region.

As Catia Pernigotto commented: *"Looking at the outcomes of the focus groups and the interviews, we have rapidly understood that if we want to make a real and sustainable change on the ground, we can not simply work on the single employee. We have understood that the action has to be focussed on the worker, the working environment - employers as well as the whole organisation. In other words: the action of the partnership has to take into consideration the whole business atmosphere"*.

DIFFERENT ACTORS MEETING AT AN IMPORTANT CROSS-ROADS



The transnational partners' meeting in Madrid

Another strength of VAL.I. can be found in its extremely varied and wide-ranging partnership, composed of twelve members coming from different backgrounds and contributing to the sustainability of the project. The lead organisation, API (the association for small and medium enterprises) as well as the trade union provide a direct communication channel into the enterprises. What is also very important is the direct participation of the enterprises, both in the design and the testing phase of the project. In fact, starting from December 2006, these enterprises will be "used" as a testing group insofar as they will be asked to determine whether the role of the 'business atmosphere advisors' actually works in practice.

As Ezio Benetello, from UIL trade union, said: *"the project is located at an important cross-roads: it triggers an important step, such as bargaining and dialogue between employers and employees. In this context, it is important to involve the partnership representatives from trade*

unions, employer organisations, as well as local public bodies. Only with these actors on board, can we achieve sustainable results".

The success and the potential impact of the VAL.I. project has attracted the attention and support from the regional authorities. Concetto Maugeri, from the Piemonte region said: "*the VAL.I. project is particularly important for the development of the region as it gives innovative answers to companies and workers, as well as promoting good synergies with the services already existing on the ground. We are and will try to link this innovation with labour policies programmes at regional level. The experience coming from EQUAL, and especially from VAL.I. will be integrated in the future Operational Regional Programmes in order to guarantee the development and sustainability of these innovative tools*".

VAL.I.'s strong partnership is just one of the strengths of this extremely interesting project. The EQUAL project has set up an innovative and integrated approach to reduce and, what is even more important, prevent the marginalisation and instability of workers as well as the fragility of businesses within the Piemonte region. Also, VAL.I. has a clear goal in mind: to assure the transferability of results and sustainability of the proposed practice. This is done by thinking ahead and working constantly with a focus on the territory, engaging the right actors and activating good synergies with already existing services and networks.

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