

JOB COACHING: A BRAND NEW SMILE FOR THE OVER 45s

HIGHLIGHTS

Łódź, the second largest city in Poland, welcomes visitors with its grey and old buildings, and 'melancholy' mood. This is the picture of a city, as well as a whole region, that is no longer booming, but rather is struggling with the consequences of recent economic and structural change. Before 1990, Łódź's economy was mainly known for its renowned textile industry, an industry that emerged during the nineteenth century owing to the favourable chemical composition of its water. However, due to the shift in production to Asian countries, the textile industry in the area declined dramatically during 1990 and 1991 - and now no major textile company survives in Łódź today. Aside from textiles, other vital sectors of the local economy such as healthcare and education are also undergoing profound structural change.

The introduction of new technologies and increasing professional requirements, amongst other things, mean that these sectors have to rapidly adapt in order to survive. And in this situation, survival means trying to balance the demands of a new, free-market economy with its potentially detrimental social cost!

However, the innovation of Making a Change a Chance in comparison with four-way model, 4T can be seen in the originality of its structure. Three sub-projects - Learn, Adapt and Renew, Work Capability and Contact - have been especially designed to give an all-embracing service to SMEs facing structural change. Each sub-project has its own specific features, and emphasises and addresses different competences within SMEs, namely their competence to operate, renew, make plans and work together. This tripartite approach enables the specific know-how of each project partner to be exploited as they are each responsible for the implementation of a specific sub-project.

The recent closure of textile companies and the redundancies in the healthcare and education sectors have left thousands and thousands of workers without a job. Those who have not retired or moved to the capital or abroad have been forced to change their vocation, find a new job and adapt to new economic demands. Many of them, especially the most vulnerable, are still not managing to integrate into this new environment, which has pushed the unemployment rate sky-high. Among the most vulnerable, the over 45s are struggling with an exceptionally difficult situation: they are not only dealing with the constant threat of unemployment, but are also facing the negative and often discriminatory attitude of employers, which includes cases of bullying. With poor IT and language skills and often a distrust of others, the over 45s do not know how to protect themselves and usually feel inclined to give up at the first sign of an obstacle.

Thanks to the EQUAL initiative, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) office in Poland has set up the Alliance for Work project to address the precarious position of the Łódź region and particularly the plight of older workers who reside there. UNDP works in collaboration with an impressive number of partners deployed on the ground, including trade unions, employer representatives, community organisations and research bodies. Many of these partners have never worked together before, which marks a major breakthrough for partnership-based employment measures aimed at older workers.

Alliance for Work's aim is closely aligned with the strategic guidelines of the European Employment Strategy, especially guideline number 18 which focuses on promoting a lifecycle approach to work and supporting active ageing. The project works to increase labour market participation by using the potential of the over 45s in a 'jobcoaching' capacity, as well as by improving the employment potential of older workers through up-skilling and training. But most of all, the project aims to change psychological and cultural attitudes, both those of older workers vis-à-vis their own professional worth, as well as those of employers and trade unions in relation to employing and managing a more mature workforce. Kamila Jezowska, coordinator and

designer for EQUAL Alliance for Work, is extremely happy with the partnership's early and visibly promising results: *"I've designed this project with my parents in mind. And now I'm glad to see that this brand new approach has already brought a smile to the faces of people that had lost hope in their future."*

A FRESH LOOK AT PROFESSIONAL REINTEGRATION

So what is the concrete action of the partnership? What is Alliance for Work exactly proposing to do to keep older workers in employment?

The EQUAL partnership strives to adapt a professional reintegration method already developed and used (with considerable success) in Holland to the Polish socio-economic context. This method - known as the 'jobcoaching system'- is founded on the interaction between an adviser/trainer, called a 'jobcoach', and a beneficiary. The interaction allows the jobcoach to determine the needs of the beneficiary in terms of job or training opportunities, as well as career orientation. It also allows the beneficiary to find ways of matching their needs to the demands of potential employers, thereby developing their vocational pathway with a greater sense of empowerment and motivation.



In Poland, this coaching role is currently undertaken by so-called 'professional advisors', civil servants working within regional and communal bodies or schools. Unfortunately, the effectiveness of such advisors has rapidly shown its limits: each professional advisor works with something like 5,000 clients, which means that they can dedicate no more than 20 minutes per person a year! EQUAL Alliance for Work seeks to

address this problem by replacing the traditional professional advisors with new jobcoaches, people who are specially trained and have the time to help older workers in finding new professional pathways by raising their skills and self-esteem.

The innovation of the jobcoaching role is two-fold. Firstly, jobcoaches are recruited among less skilled, over 45 workers at risk of unemployment, working within the healthcare sector, light industry and NGOs. This requirement enhances the jobcoach's understanding of the final beneficiaries that they support and enables them to put in place peer-centred learning strategies. Secondly, as each jobcoach has a limited number of beneficiaries (30 to 60 maximum), personalised career plans can be adapted to each beneficiary's special and diversified needs. It goes without saying that these innovations constitute a big step towards a successful guidance and supporting system for the project.

Since its start, Alliance to Work has already successfully trained 32 people to become jobcoaches. Some of these trainees have agreed with their employers to take on this role within their company full-time, whilst others have become jobcoaches as a new part-time profession. During the nine day training session, the trainees received both soft and hard training, and were prepared generally to take on their new profession. The soft training covered the provision of psychological guidance to help remove the mental barriers that usually hold older workers back from undertaking new work experiences or from acquiring new skills. This training ended in self-evaluation and communication exercises. The hard training, on the other hand, included ICT and other professional courses. There were also classes on how to use flexible forms of work, a particularly interesting solution to enhance the employability of older workers. As the partners themselves said, the first training session for jobcoaches produced excellent results for the trainees: *"The first day, the participants were a bit reluctant, while at the end of the training period, the new jobcoaches were motivated and impatient to begin their new job."*

The whole jobcoaching system is only starting, but the partners have already set their sights on high results: by the end of the project, a total of 440 over 45s in the healthcare sector, light

industry and NGOs will benefit from the new professional reintegration method. On top of that, 30 employers in the region will receive tailored, soft training and awareness-raising. Whilst this activity has not yet started, the partners hope to improve the employers' understanding of age management issues and highlight the importance of having at least one part or full-time jobcoach within their company. Overall, this constitutes an original, comprehensive approach to improving the adaptability of older workers in Poland, leading to true support for workers threatened by unemployment.

ALL IN THE SAME BOAT

The underpinning rationale for the development of EQUAL Alliance for Work was that an increase in the empowerment and employability of the over 45s would not be possible without the mobilisation and cooperation of the stakeholders acting on the ground. That is why a striking feature of Alliance for Work is the high number of partners involved: thirteen members coming from extremely different backgrounds, all bringing together their personal experiences and know-how to reach a common goal.

Alongside UNDP, Alliance for Work draws on the expertise and input of OPZZ, the main Polish Trade Union; FNSZZ, the Trade Union for SMEs; healthcare employers; employer organisations such as the Craft Chamber; non-governmental organisations (NGO) working with women; training organisations; and last but not least, research bodies such as the Textile Institute and Łódź University. These partners are now all working together to create an embracing network that is able to reach workers over the age of 45 across the whole region.



This partnership has given rise to a number of innovations and benefits. First of all, the presence of such a diverse range of partners has created a new multi-dimensional forum for communication. This forum is particularly important and striking in Poland given that it is a country that does not have a long history of social collaboration and dialogue compared with its counterparts in Western Europe.

One of the key steps in animating the forum - before starting any activities on the ground - was to discuss the benefits of keeping the over 45s in employment with employers and trade union representatives. What emerged from these initial discussions was that discriminatory practices towards the over 45s were often linked to the common belief that recruiting new staff is more 'convenient' than investing in older workers. In addition, employers held a negative stereotype of older workers as being unwilling to learn, which made them more reluctant to invest in new training. Against this backdrop, the purpose of Alliance for Work was to raise employers' awareness to the fact that investing in older workers would not only help this specific target group, but would also increase the productivity and competitiveness of the companies themselves. The main message to spread among employers was therefore: investing in older workers means investing in your own company!

The value of dialogue in identifying and responding to messages such as these - particularly when these messages relate to problems of attitude and cultural change - is priceless. As Leszek Michno from the Pinel Foundation (who was responsible for training and professional reintegration for people excluded from the labour market) puts it: *"The presence of a high number of partners can sometimes be a problem, but at the same time it constitutes something incredible: we now have, sitting around the same table, people from diverse backgrounds and experiences who did not talk to each other before. Alliance for Work has forced them to communicate and to find a common language."*

A second benefit of the diverse partnership has been the project's direct impact on the beneficiaries, as well as its increased visibility at national and regional level. Every Alliance for Work partner operates within its own particular systems and circles, and consequently is able to disseminate the results of the project to wider audiences. The all-Poland Trade Union - OPZZ, for

example, is particularly well placed to reach public authorities at national level thanks to its involvement in the tripartite Commission (trade unions, employers association and government representative). The trade union is also able to provide competent staff who can organise training in mediation and negotiation for companies that face restructuring. Another example is that of the two NGOs involved in the project (the Centre for Women Rights and the League of Polish Women) that have very strong links with smaller, local organisations in the Łódź region. These contacts enable the participation of a higher number of local bodies in the project in order to reach the most isolated locations and thereby assist the largest number of (older) women. Furthermore, these NGOs have daily, direct contact with the beneficiaries and can help them to face problems of discrimination through the provision of legal and psychological advice. Janina Miziołek, from the League of Polish Women, loves talking about her 'girls' and about how the project has changed their lives.

"Alliance for Work", she says, "is about reaching the potential that everyone has but which is often unseen and unrecognised. Everyday I see women who have lost hope asking for help, work and support. The EQUAL partnership finally brings real answers and opportunities for change as it brings hope."

EMPOWERMENT IS THE ANSWER

The jobcoaching method developed by EQUAL Alliance for work particularly targets the healthcare sector, which is a very delicate branch of the regional economy undergoing tough structural change. The sector is striving to adapt to new technological advances, finding ways of enhancing productivity and competitiveness, and raising skills levels amongst the workforce. Given that 50% of its workforce is aged over 45, the involvement of healthcare actors in the partnership is very important. Consequently, three hospitals are actually participating in the project, putting forward a total of 250 final beneficiaries.



12 nurses from the Karol Jonscher hospital in Łódź have already benefited from participation in the project. They have all received the support and guidance of a jobcoach, leading to the development of a tailor-made career development plan. As IT skills are now very much in demand in the sector, the first thing for the nurses to do was to familiarise themselves with the use of computers and informatics. Therefore for one week, the nurses received IT training,

learned to fill in tables with inmates' data, document patients' histories and generate basic statistics.

"I didn't believe I could learn so much in a week" said one of the nurses, "now I feel more secure, I don't fear the competition of the younger ones and, above all, I know that I'm no longer alone."

This seems to be a common feeling among the group. As another nurse put it: *"Before I was obsessed by the fear of not being up to performing a task and losing my job. Now I feel more motivated and confident. It's as if I'm 25 again!"*

This vision is shared also by the director of the hospital: *"Older workers are often scared to lose their job, they strive to adapt to the new requirements and they fear the younger, skilled staff. They need to overcome their fears and acquire self-confidence. Alliance for Work has shown that they can still learn and beat the competition!"*

Essentially, *Alliance for Work* is not only about overcoming fears and increasing self-esteem, but it is also about surmounting a traditional mindset, inherited from the old, communist regime. Andrzej Niderla, from the OPZZ Trade Union explains: *"The over 45s lived in a time when everything was owned by the State and everybody had a job. Unemployment is a new concept for older workers. That's why, if they lose their job, they don't know what to do, they normally sit*

and wait for things to change. In this situation, it is very important that somebody helps them to discover their own personal worth, to prove that they can still learn and work."

Through the EQUAL Initiative, Alliance for Work has developed a new idea that has already changed the lives of many by bringing hope and breaking prejudices and negative attitudes. It is this innovative idea, combined with a strong spirit of partnership, that is set to make the project a successful and sustainable model for improving the employment prospects of older workers in Poland in the long-term.

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