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Supporting the professional identity transformation of careers and employment professionals.

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Abstract

In response to the global economic crisis, the Public Employment Service (PES) 2020 Strategy outlines some of the changes to the role and function of Public Employment Services that had become necessary. This proposes that a much broader view of employment and unemployment is needed by careers and employment practitioners working within PES, which focuses on the concept of transitional labour markets and the need to make transitions pay (EU, 2013). It also argues that the social function of Public Employment Services is transforming into work focused gateways to welfare systems, providing a more tailored service delivery. As a consequence, careers and employment practitioners need to operate differently, in roles and capacities that require them to adopt, and adapt to, a new professional identity formation.

Supporting the professional identity transformation of career and employment practitioners, which is necessary to enable them to rise to the challenges of their new roles, is a key focus of the research project upon which this paper draws. A primary objective of the four year research project, funded by the European Union (2014 – 2018) is to investigate how technology-enhanced learning (TEL) approaches could facilitate identity transformation for careers and employment counsellors. The TEL approaches included the use of blended learning programmes for PES, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for careers and employment counsellors more generally, complemented by the use of on-line labour market information tools as well as on-line support for reflection and peer coaching. This paper reports blended learning programme delivered to work coaches in one PES and the MOOC delivered to careers and employment counsellors across Europe.

Key words:

Professional identity transformation; careers and employment counsellors; Public Employment Services; technology-enhanced learning

Introduction

In response to the global economic crisis, the European Public Employment Service (PES) 2020 Strategy outlines some of the changes to the role and function of careers and employment counsellors working in these services that have become necessary. A much broader view of employment and unemployment is required, with career and employment counsellors needing to operate differently, in roles and capacities that require them to adopt, and adapt to, a new professional identity that involves new skills, new competences and new understandings. This can prove to be challenging for the individuals caught up in these shifts and realignments. Supporting the professional identity transformation of careers and employment counsellors is a key objective of a four year (2014 – 2018) research programme, funded by the European Commission, progress of which is reported in this paper.

Bringing employees into the position of shaping change, instead of merely reacting, is one of the key missions of the EmployID project. Towards that end, the focus of professional learning and development needs to target 'deep learning' and to shift away from just training skills towards facilitating the transformation of the professional identity of employees, both individually and collectively. In the context of PES, EmployID has investigated how a technology-enhanced learning approach can provide this facilitation in the form of social

learning programmes, complemented by labour market information tools as well as reflection, and peer coaching.

Objectives

Supporting the professional identity transformation of careers and employment counsellors in order to enable them to meet the challenges of their evolving roles is the key aim of the project reported in this paper. The objective, mainly in the context of PES but in the latter stages of the project extended to support a wider range of careers professionals across Europe and internationally, was to investigate how technology-enhanced learning (TEL) approaches could facilitate identity transformation for careers and employment counsellors. The TEL approaches included the use of blended learning programmes for PES, a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) for careers and employment counsellors more generally, complemented by the use of on-line labour market information tools as well as on-line support for reflection and peer coaching. The focus in this paper is upon the blended learning programme delivered to work coaches in one PES and the MOOC delivered to careers and employment counsellors across Europe.

Methodology

The methodology comprised participatory design, so that learning support (both online and face-to-face) could be developed that meets the particular needs and requirements of careers and employment counsellors. Central partners in the ongoing research are the PES located in the UK, Slovenia and Croatia. These particular PES organisations were selected to compare and contrast with regard to their size and operational culture in different country contexts. As part of the training support, IT applications were developed to support counsellors with on-line reflection, peer coaching and the use of labour market information (LMI) in their practice. In the UK PES (Department of Work and Pensions) the first blended learning programme was developed to support identity transformation for employment advisers, while the second programme, reported on here, focused upon supporting identity transformation of work coaches in a PES. The results of the MOOC developed to support the continuing professional development of careers and employment counsellors more generally are also reported.

Results

The focus of the first three years of research has mainly been upon the exploration of the nature and extent of the professional identity formation of different staff groups within the PES partners (for example, work coaches, counsellors, employment advisers, managers and

learning and development staff). An initial phase of familiarisation involved the systematic analysis of the learning needs required to support the successful professional identity transformation of PES counsellors, managers, employment advisers and learning and development staff. Subsequently, close collaboration has identified specific requirements that reflect the operational contexts of different PES organisations located in different social and economic contexts. An extensive Associate Partner network has also enabled the piloting of solutions in organisations across Europe. The project team has involved senior managers as well as practitioners, to ensure sustainable development. The project also developed a MOOC on The Changing World of Work which attracted 370 mainly careers practitioners from across Europe on a voluntary basis.

The second blended learning programme for DWP was delivered to 68 work coaches and has yielded rich qualitative and quantitative data on facilitation activities in the online course. Trials of an LMI tool were incorporated in the programme, prior to wider trials with 150 work coaches and then a national roll-out to 16,000 staff.

The project team are also working with the PES Network of all European PES to extend our work across Europe and the Inter-American Development Bank has expressed interest in adapting our MOOC for delivery in Spanish in order to support PES in Latin America.

UK Blended Learning Programme 2

DWP is the biggest public service delivery department in the UK, responsible for welfare and pension policy. It employs approximately 84,300 staff based across seven groups, with approximately 20,000 practitioners working in approximately 750 Jobcentres. There are also about 1,500 employer engagement staff, specialising in work with employers. It is part of a network of 28 Public Employment Services (PES) across Europe. Following the success of the first blended learning programme early in 2015 (MOOC1) within DWP, it was decided that the second online course (MOOC2) would be delivered at the end of 2015 (note: it was called a MOOC within DWP because it used the FutureLearn MOOC platform and even though the programme itself was private and small-scale as it was a pilot of the approach). MOOC 2 was aimed at work coaches rather than Employer Engagement staff targeted in MOOC1. Overall, the evaluation results of the MOOC 2 at DWP were very positive, with critical feedback mainly relating to some IT infrastructure problems when accessing course material. The collaborative learning experience and the content of the MOOC were perceived as very useful. A detailed evaluation report based mainly on Kirkpatrick's level 1-3 evaluation questionnaires (Kirkpatrick, 1998) was produced and feedback found in the course comments can be found in the project's Year 3 report (EmployID, 2017).

The second MOOC was conducted in DWP in November and December 2015, although the flexible delivery format meant some individuals did not complete the programme until January 2016. The intervention aimed at supporting DWP Work Coaches in managing challenges in their working life as well as providing them with relevant material linked to the digital agenda and use of labour market information together with insights into coaching processes. The material covered during the six course weeks included: 1) cultural changes within DWP, 2) impact of going digital, 3) enhanced coaching (two weeks), 4) labour market information (LMI) for Work Coaches, 5) reflection on experience and learning. The content was presented in 70 separate learning steps in total.

114 DWP employees were invited to the people preparation conference before the start of the MOOC, of whom 74 finally took part in the online course, which was run on the FutureLearn platform. The evaluation team provided insights into the learning patterns of the online learners, conducted semi-structured interviews were conducted with line managers (whose staff members participated in the course) and learning and development staff responsible for design and delivery of the programme. The interviews were conducted 4-6 months after the course finished in order to gain some insights into long-term learning outcomes, the applicability of the learning and transfer of knowledge within the organization. Another source of information for the project evaluation team was the evaluation report provided by DWP.

Effects on Identity Development

The MOOC2 evaluation highlighted how there was evidence not only of individual development, such as increased digital capabilities, deeper understanding of coaching processes and how to use LMI in practice, but also of transformed attitudes to learning which amounted to a changed culture supportive of resourceful learners. Learners had actively engaged in experience exchange and collaborative discussion during the course, and this carried over to their subsequent work activities, as there was a statistically significant rise of collaborative reflection activities – compared before and after the course - on the level of “asking colleagues for support”, “actively reading colleagues’ and clients’ comments” and “supporting colleagues in finding solutions via the new skill of strong questioning”.

The social learning activities around the changing world of work also significantly changed the learners’ experience of collaborative learning. Participants agreed to a much stronger extent that the discussions with colleagues helped them to solve problems, reflect about their own learning, understand their role in the organisation and how to reach organisational and individual goals. All these improvements are important indications of resourceful learners. As learning in communities is an important aspect of professional identity

transformation (Brown & Bimrose, 2015), we can see that the course supported professional development processes on several levels.

Effects of the intervention can be observed on the level of individual development, collaborative learning and client/customer satisfaction. Looking at the level of internal processes rich feedback was collected on how to roll out an online social learning format in DWP. The positive learning effects triggered by the social learning approach implemented in DWP have also been recognised at higher management level and EmployID has clearly influenced the approach towards how learning will be implemented in DWP according to information obtained by core staff members.

The social learning programmes (MOOCs 1 and 2) taken together provided strong evidence of professional identity transformation for three groups in DWP: Work Coaches, Employer Engagement staff, and learning and development staff.

International MOOC on The Changing World of Work

Once the work with DWP on identity transformation through development and delivery of blended learning programmes was completed, it was decided to adapt what we have learned through these processes by offering a generic MOOC on the European EMMA platform which was open to everyone with an interest in the consequences for identity development of guidance, coaching and counselling staff of the changing world of work. This MOOC was delivered in March – June 2017 and attracted approximately 370 career and employment practitioners from across Europe and internationally.

The international MOOC on the Changing World of Work started in March 2017. Although the course content was designed for 5 weeks it was run over 6 weeks, including the Easter break. Similar to previous EmployID MOOCs a core didactical element was active learner engagement via discussions and reflection activities. Whilst each participant works through the lessons as an individual learner, the underlying ethos of the course is one of active learning in a professional context. The content of each week was based around the following topics: Introduction to the changing world of work; Coaching: Going Digital; Labour Market Information (LMI) and Sectoral Knowledge; Reflection and Evaluation. The course was very successful with high learner participation and more details will be presented at the conference itself.

The Inter-American Development Bank has already expressed great interest in the course as part of their ongoing activities of providing technical support networks to Employment Services in Latin America and the Caribbean (RED SEALC).

Conclusions

The long-term Vision of EmployID was that users would themselves take ownership of the ideas, processes and tools of the project so that they would continue to use and adapt them after the lifetime of the project. Hence the intention of the work on the blended learning programme (MOOC 1) was to work with DWP employer engagement staff and learning and development staff and co-create material and to work together in facilitation of learning and development in the delivery of the programme, such that ideas about employer engagement and use of LMI to support staff and clients would be owned by employer engagement staff and used in their work with both employers and work coaches. In this, the management of change strategy was successful and employer engagement staff took forward the development and adaptation of the LMI tool. The learning and development staff too started to use the ideas and skills developed in MOOC1 to feed into both MOOC2 and the use for learning and development of DWP's on-line learning support.

The intention of the work on the blended learning platform (MOOC 2) was to work with DWP work coaches and learning and development staff and co-create material and to work together in the facilitation of learning and development in the delivery of the programme for work coaches, such that ideas developed in the programme would be owned by the work coaches and used in their work (evaluation shows this was largely achieved). Again the management of change strategy was successful and learning and development staff further developed their skills in MOOC2 to feed into development and use of DWP's own on-line provision to support learning and development. For each of the three groups (work coaches; learning and development staff; and employer engagement staff) there was evidence of identity development as their work roles and identities evolved.

The International MOOC has only just finished but it was successful in facilitating a dialogue about the implications of the changing world of work for the professional identities of careers and employment counsellors in Europe. A positive outcome has been achieved, including fundamental change management and demonstrable impact. The presentation will report on developments and their evaluation.

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