

THE IMPACT OF PARTICIPATING IN EUROPEAN UNION FINANCED TRAINING PROGRAMMES OVER THE ACQUISITION OF NECESSARY KNOWLEDGE IN ORDER TO ATTRACT AND MANAGE SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS

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Abstract: *The purpose of this marketing research was to obtain relevant information regarding the impact of the participation in European Union financed training programmes over the acquisition of necessary knowledge in order to attract and manage successful projects.*

Key words: *community leader, training programme, project management.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of this marketing research was to obtain relevant information regarding the usefulness of training received under the programme: "Developing the capacity of local administrations in Romania to act as 'community leaders' in the context of European Union accession", which was organized between February 2007 - February 2009, the benefits of participating in the programme and the tangible impact in the workplace. The paper is based on a qualitative research focused on the following objectives: identifying the way in which the participants perceived this programme; determining the positive and negative aspects of this programme; identifying the motivational impulses that determine one to use the acquired knowledge in their professional activity

and to make changes within their organization.

2. Research objectives

The research was based on the following objectives:

- To measure the impact of the participation in such programmes over the acquisition of necessary knowledge in order to draw up successful projects.
- To measure the impact of the participation in such programmes over the implementation of change initiatives within the organizations.
- To determine the extent to which the participants intend to make changes within the organizations they represent, as a result of their participation in this programme.

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3. Research Design

Target

The subject population is composed of all participants in the training programme organized in order to develop the capacity of the Romanian local administrations to act as "community leaders", within the context of post European Union accession. According to the attendance lists provided by the organizers, the basic population is composed of 85 persons who attended at least one of the four modules organized within this programme.

Considerations regarding research methodology

The focus group type qualitative research was used as research method to this study.

This technique implied ample discussions with a number of two relatively homogenous groups comprising a total of 14 individuals.

The sampling method took into consideration several selection criteria, such as the position held within the organization and the grade of involvement with respect to projects management and achievement.

The focus group is a qualitative research method used in social and marketing research in order to determine certain aspects related to motivation, motivators and attitudes that cannot be communicated through monosyllabic answers. The focus group method benefits by the group's emergence of ideas, each participant developing his position as a result of the expression in group of different positions, favourable or contrary to other opinions expressed.

The focus group moderation has been carried out by a qualified person who conducted the semi-structured discussions as to get the target information, but without influencing the participants' positions by

expressing personal value judgments or others imposed by the beneficiary.

Projective techniques were employed within the two focus groups: spontaneous association, imaginative personification, filling in phrases in order to find the most subtle issues regarding the effectiveness of the evaluated training programme.

The research focused mainly on the following directions:

- identifying the way in which the participants perceived this training programme;
- identifying the motivational impulses that determine one to take part in this training programme;
- identifying the motivational impulses that determine one to use the acquired knowledge in his/her professional activity and to make changes within the organizations that he/she represents.

The synthesis of information obtained within the two focus groups will be presented further on, as well as the general conclusions of the qualitative study. Complying with the professional deontology, the conclusions will not be drawn as value judgments, but maintaining the position of the impartial researcher who transposes concrete information obtained throughout scientific methods into abstract conclusions.

4. The report of the focus group research

Within this research, which was based on two focus group meetings, we followed aspects related to the training programme carried out within the project in order to evaluate its efficiency and actual impact in the participants' professional activity.

One of the aspects taken into account was to identify the subjects' perceptions of the European Union and the way they perceive the requirements imposed by it, but also the opportunities provided. Thus,

in order to determine the subjects' attitude towards the European Union, they were invited to use their imagination to describe in a few words the European Union as an individual. The subjects provided different responses, but the general perception of the European Union was a positive one, most of the descriptions referring to a young, dynamic, active, empathic, gentle, fair female person with the attitude of a true leader and entrepreneurial spirit, but at the same time relatively rigid, somehow snob, with a valuable expertise to share. It was also described as a complex person with multiple resources and needs, very careful to details, who knows well the European legislation, who loves all her children equally, who does not waste her resources, who applies coercive measures when the established rules are breached, being fair, sometimes severe, who imposes strict rules when it comes to spending its money. In the subjects' opinion, the European Union is rich enough not to feel the need for more money, but to get focused on its administration in the general interest, being also generous and providing support instead of gifts. Finally, the European Union is perceived as a partner of discussions, who helps and expects honesty, reciprocity.

Following this exercise, we note a high level of conscientiousness regarding the European Union's potential, which was also enjoyed by Romania following its adherence to the European Community, but which currently is not sufficiently exploited.

Related to the European Union's opportunities and requirements, the subjects were given a list of words / expressions and, by their side, they were supposed to write down the first word or group of words that came to mind. The respective list comprised the following expressions: community strategic leaders,

European funds, change, sustainable partnerships. The results emphasize that, by community strategic leader, the subjects understand decision political factors; this category includes mayors, the president, community leaders and local representatives, these one being those who have to be entitled as community strategic leaders, who are able to lead to development, progress.

The European funds have been associated mostly with regional and sectoral operational programmes, community development funds, these being considered accessible financial alternatives, non-reimbursable money, external sources, money we need, but do not know how to spend.

The change is perceived by most of the subjects as an improvement, a progress, an evolution, being considered a necessity that must lead to a better life. When it comes to sustainable partnerships, subjects consider them a constructive collaboration, an agreement that implies benefits and responsibility, efficiency, sustainability.

In order to find out what the participation in the training sessions within the programme represented for subjects, they were asked to continue the following sentence: "The participation in the training sessions within the programme "The development of the capacity of Romanian local administrations to act as «community leaders», within the context of post EU accession" represented...". The most frequent expressions among the subjects' answers are "an opportunity to improve professionally and humanly", "a useful and interesting experience", "knowledge and professional evolution", but also "an opportunity to learn how to draw up successful projects from the Best Practice examples".

Another theme approached during the discussions referred to the aspects

regarding the development of administrative capacity of local public institutions and, in this respect, the aim was to obtain information upon subjects' beliefs related to the measures that must be taken in order to get the maximum benefit from the European Union accession, upon the role of partnerships in accessing the structural funds and successfully implementing the projects, and especially upon the chances of Romanian cities to flourish similarly to the major cities of Europe. In the subjects' opinion, in order to increase the capacity of the local administrations, they have to learn and adopt the European Union guiding principles, identify the needs that may be financed and develop the capacity to draw up and implement projects; in this respect, it is considered appropriate to take part in as many training sessions as possible in order to acquire the competence and capacity to absorb as many community funds as possible and get familiar with the operation mechanisms of this system. At the same time, they have to draw up successful projects in order to attract European funds for the city, region and country development and for the better quality of life, by working harder and more responsibly. Finally, "Clear strategies on long and medium term must be defined, specific for all areas, implementable step by step. This will certainly lead to greater funds absorption."

As regards partnerships, the subjects consider that their role is extremely important, and in order to be efficient, they shall be well defined, with clear responsibilities for each partner, they shall aim measurable targets which respond to the community's needs solvable only with the contribution of all parties, so that they provide benefits for as many persons as possible. Moreover, they shall have an important role within the settlement

procedures of certain community needs, their term needing to be longer than the financing one.

Regarding the chances of Romanian cities to prosper similarly to the major cities of Europe, subjects consider that, as long as we dispose of the same resources, we have equal chances, but we must express our desire by accessing more funds, qualified human resources being necessary in this respect. Also, we should get benefit from the expertise of those who joined the European Union before us, both to avoid their mistakes and to follow their positive examples. However, they consider that things evolved, the trend being towards progress with major obvious changes, but that a powerful civic education is still necessary, in addition to the mentality change.

In order to determine the subjects' judgments related strictly to the training programme, several associated aspects were brought up in this respect. A first aspect aims at the subjects' general impression over the participation in this programme, they being asked to imagine that they were talking to a workmate, presenting him their experience related to this training programme. The subjects were extremely open-minded, expressing their opinions sincerely, and as a conclusion, we can state that the majority positively appreciated the programme, as a result of the opportunity to learn to work in teams, to meet numerous workmates from other cities, to whom they shared their expertise. They remained friends and they may help each other in certain matters, thanks to the extremely well prepared and experienced professors, who shared best practice examples, and also negative examples to be avoided.

As a conclusion to what has been said on this topic, one of the subjects stated that "it had been a much more efficient

programme than numerous projects he had taken part in, especially because of the fact that emphasis was given put both to the theoretical part and particularly to the practical one. He added that "it had been an interactive programme, where nobody got bored, as compared to other programmes where his patience ended after the first day". The other participants in Focus Group totally agreed with this judgment.

During the discussions, the subjects were asked if they had faced difficulties during the participation in this training programme, and the issues determined within their assertions were that those participants also involved in the programme's organization could not take part in all courses. Also, the participants from Brasov were hindered from taking part in the entire programme due to their work schedule, as they were constrained to carry out their daily professional activities, the impact being greater over those from other cities who were able to dedicate themselves completely. We should remark that these issues did not occur as a result of organizers' fault, but are related to the specificity of each person's activity, "the organizers doing their job as they considered appropriate".

Another remarked aspect is represented by the fact that, at a certain moment, the course referred strictly to the persons who draw up projects, the persons who knew very well all procedural steps, and for those expert in auctions, for instance, it was difficult enough to follow from the very beginning, until they got used with the terminology. Thus, for the future programmes, it is recommended that the target group be selected more rigorously.

Through another exercise of imagination, the subjects were allowed to ask questions referring to the training programme to a subject selected among them, who was

supposed to be considered as the project manager of this programme.

Among the questions asked to the project managers of the two Focus Groups we mention: "How do you see the continuation of this programme according to the needs identified following the questionnaires and tests which we took part in?", "Which is the next step for our development and for the programme's continuation for everybody's benefit?", "Is there a participant who gave more numerous wrong answers at the final tests than at the initial test?", "What is your opinion on the course participants?", "When will the next course take place?", "As a manager, what are your expectations from the participants to this programme?", "Seeing what has been achieved in Braşov in a year from the project's commencement, what is your current impression?"

In their turn, the project managers were asked to give answers to all questions as they considered appropriate. Thus, it was decided to organize Module 6 as well, a module focused mainly on the Public Auctions area, the subjects expressing their wish towards their workmates from Braşov Town Hall, Projects department, to draw up another successful project for another training programme to be organized in a tourist town, in order to combine the useful with the pleasant, but mainly to allow participants to dedicate themselves completely to the programme.

Regarding the project manager's opinion about the participants in this course, discussions revealed the fact that they were very well prepared. When it came to the visible results in Braşov as compared to the moment when this project commenced, a significant change was noticed regarding people. The missing project part, from the point of view of the subject who played the role of project manager, is connected to the

participants' involvement in order to create project ideas, in project teams, so as to become proactive in this field.

At the question related to the possibility that a participant give more wrong answers at the final tests than at the initial ones, the subjects considered that such a thing was impossible; on the contrary, they considered that the final answers were far superior to initial ones as a result of their satisfaction towards the efficiency of the training methods and of the lecturers' high quality, one of the subjects considering that, "in general, the event was a real success".

In order to find out what the subjects would have preferred in addition to this programme, they were asked to specify the changes they would have made to the organization if they had been responsible for the organization of this training programme within another region. As a first change, the subjects' answers took into consideration the selection of a tourist location, so that the programme might not represent an additional task for the participants, i.e. not to be forced to go to their office and, meanwhile, when they find some free time, to attend the courses and to obtain the maximum involvement from the participants.

Another possible change identified is represented by the assignment of a larger period of time for the presentation of best practice examples, but in short videos, which present a best practice example for each financing axis. In the subjects' opinion, these images would draw the attention of all participants in a more efficient way.

Related to the aspects connected to the projects achievement, the subjects were asked to determine the importance of the qualification of the persons involved, but also to identify the potential benefits for the city where they reside, following the

successful implementation of certain projects. In this respect, the subjects consider that this programme fitted like a glove those persons who work in the projects area, as they have to draw up projects with maximum accuracy. In order to do this, they must be aware of all details, the aspects that have to be taken into consideration being extremely numerous; otherwise, that project risks to be compromised. Thus, as the expertise is extremely important, those persons must be very well trained and in different areas, the subjects considering that their expertise was completed also by taking part in this training programme, acquiring significant knowledge.

Although there were certain persons who asserted that the presentation was not very convenient for them as the language used was not very familiar. They recommended for future programmes that the participants be selected more carefully as for the benefits to be maximum for all. The majority consider that the access to such programmes must not be restricted because it is recommended that one or two persons from each office know all this information, motivating that, in a certain moment, they might need it. The general conclusion is that the programme was useful, very helpful also for those persons whose professional activities framework implies a close collaboration with them, although they do not draw up projects.

Regarding the cities' benefits brought by the achievement of several projects successfully ended, most of the subjects indicated the economic benefits, followed by the social ones and the increase in life quality, in general.

During the discussions, the aim was to identify the benefits of taking part in this training programme, and also their impact at the work site. Thus, at the question related to the consequences that the

participation at the training programme had in their professional activity, the subjects responded that, during this programme, they acquired the ability to make correlations, a fact which is extremely important, correlations without which financing applications cannot be accurately evaluated. They also mentioned that the programme generated measurable effects, this year registering more approved projects and greater financings.

At the question "Do you consider that the activity of the organizations whose representatives took part in this training programme changed significantly?", the subjects answered that, broadly speaking, significant changes are not possible as the activity of the positions they occupy does not allow them to act as such and, as non strategic leaders, they are not entitled to initiate change actions within the organization. Because of the fact that they are only subordinates, they consider it impossible to make changes without political support. However, attending this course, they have learnt to appreciate more the work of the other team members, they have learnt what drawing up a project, acquisitions truly mean, thus succeeding in outlining a global view.

Moreover, a concrete result following the participation in this training programme is the creation of a close connection between workmates, they becoming much more united and collaborating permanently. In the subjects' opinion, these changes reflected by the acquisition of certain skills are extremely important as changes of attitude and vision represent personal changes which will lead in time to organizational changes.

Another effect of this programme over the activity carried out by those who draw up projects is represented by the fact that, today, the subjects find it easier to make projects as compared to the period before

the participation in this programme when numerous clarifications occurred within the written projects, almost impossible to understand, the subjects being convinced that "everything was written complying with the guide provisions". Subsequently, the Braşov Town Hall team drew up a project without any clarification, an aspect considered by the participants as an excellent progress, "the last project having passed the administrative stage without any clarification, and the technical evaluation stage with only one clarification", the difference in this respect being significant.

The subjects consider that, out of all participants who attended this training programme, the persons who benefited the most are those who become part of the process of project accomplishment and implementation, followed by those who take care of auctions or who work within other departments in permanent connection with the latter. However, the programme represented a resource of information and improvement for all of them, both humanly and professionally.

Regarding the resources of information used by subjects in order to acquire the necessary knowledge for drawing up projects, they mentioned the Internet and training sessions, the latter representing the basis for documentation and also an extremely important aspect for them, as they may ask questions, being able to learn from others.

As a general opinion upon what was discussed during the two focus groups, the subjects mentioned that the training programme to which they participated - "The development of the capacity of Romanian local administrations to act as «community leaders», within the context of post EU accession"- had represented a pleasant memory.

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