

THE PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES – A SUBJECT TO BE QUESTIONED, TRAINED AND EVALUATED

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Abstract: *The paper at hand brings forward a synthesis of the theoretical approaches of professional competences, of their transfer from one professional context to another. The professional referentials are also presented, as they are necessary in describing and shaping competences. The acquisition of competences is also described, both from an individual and a collective perspective. Last but not least, the issue of counselling connected to the process of validation of competences acquired via non-formal and informal means is also discussed.*

Key words: *professional competences, competence training, competence evaluation, professional referential.*

1. The diversity of approaches of competences

The specialists in education came forward with an alternative to the much criticized behaviourist paradigm of learning at the end of the 20th century, more precisely, in its last two decades (Coudray & Gay, 2009; Zarifian, 2001, Cros & Raisky, 2010). This alternative proposed the competence based approach. The meanings given in the definitions of the term 'competence' are varied, with significant differences being visible between the Anglo-saxon and the French researchers.

Thanks to the competences that he holds, the performer, owner of some cognitive resources, is capable of obtaining the expected results by controlling special categories of situations and respecting rules and constraints (Perrenoud, 2001).

Competences can be seen as potential resources which help the employee to complete his tasks in a given organisational context, using the means provided by it (Tardif, 2006; Samurçay & Rabardel, 2004). In the complex 'tissue' of competences one can identify three components with different shares from one task to another: a) knowledge b) abilities and c) attitudes and values (Tardif, 2006). A special part in the category of attitudes is played by the responsibility and autonomy of the employee (Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council, of 23 April 2008). The two features make the difference between the mediocre performer and the excellent one and were named by some authors 'competency' in order to differentiate them from the superordinate and integrative term 'competence' (Brockmann, Clarke, & Winch, 2009; Woodruffe, 1993).

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2. Competence as a product and as a process

According to the Taylorism perspective on the workflow, competence is a succession of elementary learned gestures which, when correctly performed, guarantee the accomplishment of the aim. Competence, as a product of learning and experience was useful and sufficient for the entire professional life. The scientific organisation of work, which was useful for decades in various types of activities, proves to be obsolete in the contemporary world and needs to be rethought and redefined not only as a simple sum of knowledge, abilities and attitudes, but most importantly as a sum of complex combinations, a permanent construction process, where the same 'ingredients' can be used in various configurations, adapted to the professional situations which need to be attended to; moreover, every constitutive element of the competence modifies according to the elements which are associated to it. For this reason, when analysing competence, one cannot ignore a certain processuality, of dynamic, evolutionary and adaptive articulation of the individual's resources of the resources of the environment where he acts (Le Boterf, 2010).

Next to the idea of some fluid configurations, which are adaptive to the specific of the request at a certain moment of the activity, the dynamic character of the professional competence during one's individual career should also be mentioned. Usually, the competence that the individual has when he is hired is completed by new theoretical acquisitions, new skills and experiences coming as a result of completing the tasks in the job description and cultivating the professional interests, the individual thus reaching professional mastery. The notion of professional mastery has a double meaning: on the one hand it indicates the maximum level of personal performance and on the other hand it reports itself to a postulated standard of professional performance. In this case, competence does not reside in its capacity to reproduce knowledge and skills, but in the ingenuity of the subject to efficiently combine them in order to rapidly adapt himself to the professional situation.

The idea of the difference in complexity and combination possibilities underlies the classification done by Bandura (2003), who divides competences in two categories: determined competences and generative competences. The determined competences insure optimal means of task completion, performed exactly as they were learned and leaving little freedom of variation to the individual. In exchange, the generative competences are spontaneously built and prove to be effective in unfamiliar situations, the individual being able to organise them smoothly and innovatively: the negotiation competences, which differ very much at the level of content and conditions in which they are activated, perfectly illustrate this type of competences.

3. Competence transfer

A particular field of professional competences is represented by the transferable competences. The logical correctness of the syntagma 'transferable competence' can be contested using arguments connected to the field of application of the competence, given the fact that the dynamic ensemble of individual resources which are organised inside a competence reports itself to a family of situations which have a common core, therefore the competence is meaningful in a limited field of application.

The competence itself does not hold any intrinsic quality which could make it

transferable. Le Boterf (2000) highlights the fact that transferability is not the attribute of the competence, but that it represents the capacity of the professional to establish relations, to identify similitudes and make connections between two types of situations. The personal acquisitions become transferable through individual arrangements and through the existence of the transversal intention as Rey states cit. in Le Boterf, 2000), from a number of people who hold the same competences in a professional field. Only some of them are capable to successfully use them in new contexts. The capacity to transfer competence is probably the result of a reflexive effort of the professional. This effort excludes the simple application of a competence in a new context (when it can prove to be inefficient) but entails the analysis of the new situation and a recombination of knowledge, skills and conclusions from previous experiences so as to fit the problem to be solved.

Tardif (1999) underlines that unlike the application of competence, which consists in simply practically activating a learned means of action, transfer of competence entails a recontextualisation of the learned things for a particular context, which leads to a new type of learning. Therefore, the individual is bound to build a representation of the problem to be solved by using an analogical reasoning and comparing it to previous acquisitions. The above stated facts prove the existence of the paradox on which the transfer capacity is based: previous acquisitions need to be contextualised in order to be transferred, this being the only way in which the person could identify the situations where previously acquired and exercised knowledge and skills can be valued. The expert in a certain domain holds a rich repertoire of particular situations which he has faced and which he can reactivate in new or unusual situations in order to adequately recombine them. Thus, the expert can be called 'the man of the situation'.

4. Referentials – a step forward in describing and shaping competences

The definition of competences is useful in order to describe an occupation or a professional training programme, the competences being integrated in the professional and the competence referential (Paquay, 2012). In the francophone world the referential is a descriptive and normative document (Chauvigné & Lenoir, 2010), situated between the real work, the prescribed work and the idealistic work (Legendre & David, 2012). The referential, in its multiple stances –of professional activities, competences, training, evaluation-certification, gradually becomes the milestone of curricular architecture (Perrenoud, 2001). A new pedagogy of training is brought forward via the referential. This pedagogy replaces the one focused on objectives, which was the result of behaviourist psychology, derived to a great extent from Taylorism (Paquay, 2012).

The professional activity referential is the document which describes, based on the analysis of work, the activity conducted by an operator in a given context. It associates knowledge, abilities, attitudes, values and personality traits to the professional activities and tasks. The work analysis is done by teams made of experts of the analysed occupation and specialists in labour psychology. They trace the emblematic situations (Mayen, Metral, & Tourmen, 2010; Perrenoud, 2001) in order to shape the professional referential as completely as possible.

Based on the professional referential, using the didactic implementation, the competence referential is designed. The competence referential is the key element of human resources management (Cross & Raisky, 2010; Delobbe, 2009). The next step

consists in elaborating the training referential, document which indicates the objectives and the content of training and offers didactic instructions to the trainers and to the trainees. The current training referentials use learning outcomes and ECVET/ ECTS value credits, aiming to reinforce the connection between the education-training system and the system of the organisation (Etude Cedefop, 2010).

In the assessment referential the expected results are anticipated, the forms and criteria of evaluation are indicated and grouped in the domains of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes. The ensemble of these documents constitutes the certification referential (Raisky, 2001).

The professional didactic plays an important part in designing the referentials, because it underlines the place of the learner as an actor of his own training, engaged in the analysis of his own professional practise. Through reflexive confrontations, the learner acquires not only specific competences, but also the competence to generate competences (Barbier & Galatanu, 2004). When designing the ensemble of referentials specific to one occupation, the analyst/trainer reports himself either to professional didactics or to other orientations concerning the professional activity, for the process of designing the referentials to be coherent and suitable to the labour market (Mayen, Métral, & Tourmen, 2010; Pastré, Mayen, & Vergnaud, 2006). To be specific, the aim of the training referential is to coherently but flexibly guide training, coming forward with a minimum of didactic and methodological reference marks to ensure the quality of training and certification, thus validating mutual trust among the training centres from various geographic areas (Eckert & Veneau, 2000).

In Romania, the role of the training referentials is played by the occupational standard and the training programmes, which offer useful information in the stages of projection, implementation and certification of training. Due to the fact that the referential, in any of its European versions, is not used in Romania, a coherent trans-national model was designed for the *Compétences pour l'Europe* (2012-1-IT1-LEO05-02837) project. The model was based on professional didactics and was based on a common articulate approach, which should allow the mobility of European citizens and the acknowledgement of their qualifications, via transparent training and evaluation. Cocoradă and Pavalache-Ilie (2014), innovatively come forward with a case study for the textile assembler occupation.

The key element of the training referential is the training module, associated to a learning path. As the basic unit of the training referential, the module foresees the learning experiences. Despite its prescriptive nature, the training referential has a variable structure depending on the training centre or on the trainer. Without being unanimously accepted, its structure elaborates on the aims, educational intentions, list of targeted competences and the matrix of the objectives of training of the referential in the first part, while in the second part it describes the training units, in a modular approach (Côté, 2009). Information concerning the connection with the competence units, the foreseen duration, the lists of knowledge and abilities and the evaluation methods and the associated criteria is compulsory for each training unit.

In some education and training systems, other elements are added to the already mentioned ones: details regarding the professional activities and component tasks, the associated ECVET or ECTS credits, the initial and final assessment tests for one module.

The training referential contains the training units through which the forming of competences is projected, at global level. Due to the fact that training duration may vary

from an educational system to another, the importance of each competence in the professional activity and the average difficulty of its completion process were established according to the view of experts, similar to the methodology proposed in the COMINTER (<http://www.tg4transparency.com/project>) project. To this aim, the method of consulting expert trainers and occupational experts was used. After the operationalisation of the concept ‘importance of the competence’ for the analysed occupation, each expert assessed the importance of each competence in the occupational ensemble, attributing percentages so that the sum of percentages be 100. The average of the shares attributed by the experts became the share of the given competence in the occupational ensemble.

The importance of each competence in the exercising of the occupation was shared with the EQF (European Qualification Frame) level, a complex factor, operationalisable as follows:

- the complexity of knowledge and abilities to be formed
- the impact of the competence on the progress of other EQF levels
- the level of responsibility and autonomy needed in exercising the occupation and the workload requested by the formation of the competence.

The way of going from the competence units to the training units varies from a practical point of view, more solutions being possible: (i) bi-univocal correspondence between the competence units and the training units and (ii) the reunion of more competences inside a training unit or the allocation of more training units for a single competence. The option for one solution or the other is not free of subjective criteria, one relevant criterion being the unity which results from the training objectives and the connection with a key professional situation.

On long term, the training referential can contribute to the improvement of the effectiveness of the educational-training system in Romania and partner countries, offering a coherent transnational model, based on some recent indicators

5. The training of competences, in their individual and collective dimensions

Le Boterf (2013) highlights a frequently ignored aspect concerning the dual nature of competences: being the result of knowledge acquisition, training and consolidation of skills and abilities, internalization of values and concurring attitudes, competences are undoubtedly individual constructions, where the volitional-motivational system of the individual constitutes an important catalyst. When confronted to a specific professional imperative, each individual will tackle it in his own manner, activating his personal operational schemes.

The effectiveness of professional competence is also conditioned by the social elements where the professional behaviours are exercised. Firstly, in order to act competently, the individual has to use, besides the personal resources (knowledge, skills, culture, experience etc.) resources coming from the internal organisational environment: regulations, norms, databases, networks of collaborators. Secondly, the body of knowledge which underlies the competence is the result of a collective approach, often made outside the work context where the knowledge is used (research centres, universities, communities of professionals and experts).

Although personal commitment is absolutely compulsory in the building of a competence, shared responsibility between the professional, the managing board and the training unit proves to be equally important in taking competent action.

Le Boterf (2000) states that in the organisational context, competence results from the intersection of three factors:

- Knowing how to act, which entails self-motivation and combining the adequate resources in order to obtain success.
- Wanting to act, therefore being motivated by personal interests and the exciting character of the job
- Being able to act in concrete conditions, either facilitating or blocking your action, existing at organizational level (type of management, interpersonal relations, etc.)

The analysis of work situations highlights the individual's need to permanently report himself to the norms and prescriptions established by the professional body to which he belongs and which consists in an action referential, basically a subculture where the rules of the job crystallised from previous experience. Clot (1999) extrapolates the linguistic notions of gender and style to the professional context. Thus, gender entails 'the means of action and reporting oneself to problems, as well as the attitude towards things and people'. This referential sets the standard, indicating the effective and acceptable professional and social practises on the one hand, and the censurable and risky ones on the other hand, so in other words it designs the collective dimension of behaviour.

Style is shaped as the expression of the distance at which the individual places himself towards gender, from which he takes inspiration and which he interpretes to the end of performing as well as possible in his position. It is difficult for the individual to be constantly competent in a fragile group, which does not favour a professional culture and refuses to critically evaluate itself and learn from the experience of its members. The same individual will not only prove himself competent, but continuously refine his competences inside an organisation which displays strong culture, where the human resource is not only a means, but an aim in itself and where practise communities are favoured (Wenger, 2015). These communities act both explicitly, via meetings held by specialists and implicitly, by sharing the experiences and exchanging ideas, just like inside an invisible institution.

The ameliorative interventions are the necessary follow-up of the actions aiming to investigate the organisational field. These actions are not very frequent in Romania. In order to demonstrate the validity of the possibility to ameliorate the relational means of the employees who interact directly and daily with the public, Pavalache-Ilie (2007) have organised and conducted a pilot study to which people who are in contact with customers every day due to the nature of their job. In order to project the training material, the training needs of the participants were identified based on the analysis of their competence profile and current level of competence.

From the psychosocial competence profile of the public sector employees, the dimension of psychosocial abilities (general and specific) needed to interact with the customer was selected and a format competence profile was built. Based on it, a training programme was designed. The training programme consisted of three sessions of three hours each, discussing three topics (a) active listening in the dialogue with the customer b) the 'I-You' type messages and (c) the transactional analysis as an instrument of effective interaction.

In order to assess the effectiveness of the training programme, the variables involved in effective customer communication were measured: empathy, assertiveness, perceived self-efficacy, both before the start and after the end of the training programme. The comparison of the results of the test and post-test leads to encouraging conclusions. Even

if the plus is statistically significant only in the case of empathy, progress was present for the other targeted variables as well, as a more or less obvious tendency. The participation in training programmes designed to form the psychosocial competences increases the level of some components of assertivity, perceived self-efficacy and empathy, which are all very necessary for an effective relationship with the customer, for the effectiveness of work and for the wellness of employees at the workplace. The modest growth registered at the level of assertivity could be explained by cultural arguments: all participants in the programme were women and the Romanian society is still male-dominated. Men are generally more assertive than women.

Approximately one month after the end of the programme, the impact of the training was assessed in individual and group conversations with the participants, who expressed their satisfaction for taking part in the programme and mentioned the positive effects that it had on personal and professional level. One of the participants declared that there are professional interaction situations when she uses the knowledge acquired during the programme or when she encounters emotions that the applications triggered and she tries to act according to these emotions.

6. Counselling Connected to the Process of Validation of Competences Acquired Via non-Formal and Informal Means

The idea of knowledge-based society has accelerated the production of knowledge, simultaneously with the need to rapidly integrate it in the activity, using both traditional sources and knowledge supply chains (OCDE, 2004). The three types of learning, formal, informal and non-formal can be described from various perspectives: degree of control given to the learner (Mocker & Spear, 1982), the tacit/explicit criterion (Lejeune, 2011; Vermersch, 2006), intentionality degree (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004; Eraut, 2000) or the places and moments when they occur (Eraut, 2000). The valorification of some complementary ways of learning creates a more generous framework for workforce mobility and professional and personal development of all the individuals (Colardyn & Gordon, 2005).

Validation is defined as the process of identification, evaluation and social recognition of the competences acquired in various contexts (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). It makes the difference between the current age and the previous ones, which valued knowledge a lot less (Triby, 2005; de Rozario, 2003). The validation of non-formal and informal learning generates controversy, being often perceived as an association between opposing universes. The reason for this consists in the strong disjunctions which supposedly exist between public, theoretical or codified knowledge and personal, tacit, experiential knowledge, as well as between the two involved organisations, the school and the company (Ancori & Cohendet, 2003; Eraut, 2000).

The recognition of two categories of knowledge via certifications which offer the same rights entails the risk of devalorisation of the certifications. This major risk could be added to an excessively generous issuing of certifications, whose control could be done through new, superimposed validations (Cavaco, 2008; Triby, 2005; Ancori & Cohendet, 2003).

The EU documents from 2012 focusing on the validation of the competences acquired via non-formal and informal means suggest the introduction, in all national validation systems, of some recommendations concerning the guiding and counselling activities

which precede the evaluation and certification ones. The counselling activity completely covers the interval between the subscription of the candidate and his certification, but is mostly done in the preliminary stage of the assessment in view of certification. The quality of counselling directly influences the efficacy of validation as well as the candidate's satisfaction and the process of life-long learning.

One aspect which remains practically unsolved concerns the training of the professionals involved in all stages of the validation process (European Commission, 2011). In the assessment activities the same methods and instruments used during training in the evaluation sequences of the learning results can be used, including the transferable credit system. The guidance and counselling activities are personalised and therefore more difficult to standardise and require solutions which are not yet completed.

The main objective of counselling is the facilitation of the access of candidates to the certification of competences. The counsellor is asked to anticipate the problems which a certain candidate could face and support him in solving those problems, so that he (the candidate) makes the right decisions (Mayen, 2006). The main attributions of the counsellor are to ensure access to information, to identify the competences of the candidate, to offer support to the candidate in describing his relevant experiences and to verify these experiences, to prepare him for the certification assessment or for another training or for coping with a hypothetical failure.

Ensuring access to information is done by offering relevant and personalized data (Guichard & Huteau, 2007), reading topics, analysis and use of selected data (Bouy, 2012). The counsellor facilitates a certain and adequate relation between the offered information and the representation system of the candidate at the validation of the competences acquired via non-formal and informal means (Guichard & Huteau, 2007).

The candidate is assisted in probing his professional and personal experience through reflection reported to the criteria defined in the referentials of the occupation under discussion. He is afterwards given support in probing the relevant experiences, via objective proof and training for the assessment stage. The assessment is a formative one, developing useful competences to the candidate in life-long learning (Gauthier, 2008).

The counsellors use a hybrid method in their approach, in which they combine in adequate proportions to each candidate the history of his life, the balance of competences, the personal portfolio, the work analysis and the referential of some occupations, all adapted to the needs of each candidate (Cavaco, 2008). The guiding and counselling activity is all the more efficient because it allows even the adults with modest training levels to understand the logic of the validation process and to get to the certification stage (Bouy, 2012; Cavaco, 2008).

An important benefit of the training activity in view of validation is learning about the self, which helps the individual navigate on the labour and training market (European Commission, 2011; Werquin, 2010; Bulgarelli & Clark, 2009; Alheit & Dausien, 2005). Furthermore, counselling stimulates and maintains the motivation to learn and develops the capacity of learning how to study at your own pace (Bryony & Ruth, 2010; OCDE, 2004; OCDE, 1996).

Regardless of whether the assessment in view of certification ends with the result 'competent' or 'not yet competent' the consequences of counselling are beneficial on long term, due to the fact that they improve the attitude of applicants towards competence validation and their own experience, as well as the attitudes towards themselves or towards work. By running for certification, the beneficiaries of counselling services can

benefit from extra-orientation towards training, career shifting or improvement of the personal position (Bulgarelli & Clark, 2009).

Due to the fact that it admits the major importance of counselling in view of competence validation, the synthesis document of the European Confederation of Syndicates gives pertinent recommendations aimed at improving this practice:

- The stimulation of the integration of validation of NFIL in the human resources departments.
- Improved information and counselling of the employees of companies.
- Stressing the role of guidance at all stages, before, during and after validation.
- The better adaptation of guidance services to the target public.
- Offering the warranty of professionalization of the actors who ensure the guidance of the candidates (Damesin, Fayolle, Fleury, Malaquin, & Rode, 2014).

In Romania, as a country in the European Union, there are constant efforts of adopting and adapting the common practices validated in the countries which have a tradition in the training, evaluation and validation of competences. The focus falls on two main objectives. On the one hand, the effective training of the workforce in view of increasing employment. On the other hand, we aim at the acknowledgement of the certifications obtained in Romania on the European labour market and at allowing the mobility of the workers in the European space.

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