



# ***Fostering a learning environment in Social Field***

## ***How to prepare Employees for the Future***

The content of this document represents the views of CONCORDIA Humanitarian Organization and partners only and is their sole responsibility. The Agency and the Commission are not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.



Sapere utile



## Premises

The economic and social world, in which we find ourselves, is moving rapidly: this requires organizations able to adapt quickly to changing circumstances and this means learning. It is not possible to talk about smart, sustainable and inclusive growth without speaking about human development.

Too often in social sector learning opportunities are seen as a luxury and even when these are available the professionals struggle to find the time and mental space to benefit. This is why, in the framework of **FOCUS project**<sup>1</sup> ([www.projectfocus.eu](http://www.projectfocus.eu)) we conducted a Delphi consultation involving eight stakeholders in social field from 4 countries aiming to better understand how we could better adapt learning to the future needs of the workplaces. Our aims were to:

- Consider ways in which SMEs from the social field could become more involved in systematic workplace training of their employees: development of learning paths, reflection on career guidance, allocation of resources, development of mentors' network, etc.
- Discuss structure and content of possible continuous learning paths as systemic initiatives involving Social Affairs Ministry, education and training providers, the category association, and employers.
- Enhance motivation of employees in participating in continuous training through different incentives.

In the framework of this consultation adult learning in the workplace was contemplated within the definition used by different EU documents<sup>2</sup>, respectively as including different forms of learning:

	<b>Formal</b>	<b>Nonformal</b>	<b>Informal</b>
<b>Learning</b>	Organized and structured environment	Organized and structured environment	Not organized (daily activities at the workplace)
<b>Structured</b>	Yes (objectives, time or resources)	Yes (objectives, time or resources)	No/No specifically
<b>Certification</b>	Formal qualification	No	No
<b>Examples</b>	- apprenticeship-type program - short-cycle higher education programs	- employer-based training - self-study - job shadowing	- peer learning - exchanges with colleagues - learning by doing

Learning and working comprises three areas in which learning takes place:

	<b>Formal-external</b>	<b>Formal-internal</b>	<b>Informal-internal</b>
<b>Learning</b>	Training offered by <b>external providers</b> (educational institutions, universities, etc.)	<b>The organization</b> offers internal seminars, safety training courses, etc	<b>The organization</b> is approaching new challenges in the context of work (processes, clients, etc.), where new knowledge, qualifications and competencies are required

Workplace learning requires a new collaborative culture in which both employees and managers:

- are **responsible for organizing their work and learning processes**;
- **define goals for competence development**;
- benefit of support from the **in-house training department, learning partners and learning guides**.

<sup>1</sup> FOCUS - Forward LOoking SoCial EUrope Skills is a project funded by the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission and coordinated by CONCORDIA Humanitarian Organization (Romania) together with partners from 4 countries – National College of Social Workers (Romania), Fachhochschule Vorarlberg Gmbh (Austria), SOSU Østjylland (Denmark) and Istituto Formazione Operatori Aziendali – IFOA (Italy). The project goal is to contribute to equip professionals in social field with the necessary skills and competences in order to deal with the current and future challenges.

<sup>2</sup> European Union (2018), Promoting adult learning in the workplace, Final report of the ET 2020 Working Group 2016 – 2018 on Adult Learning.

## 6 Steps for fostering learning environments in social field at European level

What social field professional need to acquire through workplace training are **solution-oriented practical tools** allowing them to **read new trends** and to **find the most efficient and appropriate solutions**. These tools are often introduced and experienced during formal training, but are not systematically integrated in the daily work.

We invite you to find below the most important findings of the Delphi consultation conducted with the involvement of professionals from Austria, Denmark, Italy and Romania about the main factors facilitating a workplace learning culture.

1. **Experiential learning should play a bigger role in social work training**, in a **symbiotic relationship between theory and practice**. Employees need to be able to **find solutions for the day-to-day situations**, but also **to connect the new solutions with a theoretical background** that will support a long-term understanding of the working methodology and approach. They should have the capacity to observe, reflect, conceptualize and express their experience in order to share it with others.

**Recommendation 1** - To link theory and practice, experts suggest a methodology based on **case study examples** and **situations of practical social work**. **Cross-sectoral programs** (based on diversity of points of view), a mix of **simulation**, **peer learning**, and **analytical discussion of cultural conflict** are at the basis of innovative learning solutions.

2. **Reflection, the cornerstone**. In an ideal "learning trip" reflection on real cases is at the core. Social field professionals should be able to reflect on the cases and case-management exploring theoretical backgrounds, systemic approaches, individual emotions, personal attitudes, intuitions and their experiences, as well as the experiences of colleagues. The managers should support and motivate their employees to reflect and act in this way and provide them the necessary resources (time and expertise mainly).

**Recommendation 2** - Reflection on case management with colleagues (even best within the multidisciplinary/interinstitutional team) with the support of a supervisor in a weekly/every two weeks review is among the most effective learning tools as it provides continuity, a stable learning environment and relevance.

3. The key advantage of work-based learning for participants is that they develop expertise not only through the acquisition of technical skills or personal and social competences, but also through **socialization in the workplace**. Learning doesn't take place in a vacuum, but in a relational context with other people, be it colleagues or a teacher/trainer/mentor/supervisor. Nevertheless, this relational context should be characterized by a "**safety to failure**" policy: the teacher, trainer and employer should create a work and learning environment where curiosity and experimental learning is encouraged.

**Recommendation 3** - Awareness and awareness of the values of life, the culture of the organization and the way it is expressed are strong elements of an "open" organization, and this can be achieved through a real dialogue with its members.

4. **People** working in welfare organisations have high values and are often motivated by the idea of making a real difference in the world. To experience growth and self-efficacy they need to feel they are listened to not only outside, but also inside the organisation. Learning organizations are often characterized by an environment where employees **dare to think aloud**, to **experiment** and to **try new things**. Creative and experimental organizations are often learning organizations with a higher degree of employee well-being too. Fostering creative thinking and new perspectives is an important leadership task.

**Recommendation 4** - Involvement in decision-making, participation in the critical analysis of alternatives and the definition of judgment criteria are learning opportunities available to managers. Furthermore,

their capacity for facilitation, (servant) leadership and integration of solutions will be those that will determine the confidence of specialists and their motivation to get involved in such courses.

5. **Participation at all levels.** Workplace learning implies the interaction with at least two groups of stakeholders.

**(1) Other organizations participating in territorial social governance:** therefore organizations must assure their participation in the existing networks (e.g. the professional associations<sup>3</sup>, coalitions). Nevertheless, this participation must be impactful and should provide a very good leverage to increase the common knowledge on successful practices and effective social welfare policies. Large networks can be useful in terms of making technical resources and best practices available to a wide audience, or when advocating for changes in policy. Small networks, on the other hand, are better suited as learning environments as personal interactions create a much better and more meaningful space for professional growth.

**(2) The beneficiaries of the social services** who have to be actively engaged, using adapted participatory approaches; social field professionals can indeed learn a lot from them.

**Recommendation 5** - Regular training programs, informal or more formalized, online libraries and technical resources hubs for professionals can be more easily developed by collaborating platforms and coalitions. Ask yourself what are the most important networks for me to engage as a manager and what is our interest in participating in terms of learning? Am I taking advantage and further disseminating/implementing in my organization what have I learnt?"

6. The way to engage employees in workplace learning is a crucial point. Any change implies also resistance, and dealing with it means finding higher motivation. Leverage could come from:

- the existence of a specific **internal policy for knowledge management**. It would offer an appropriate setting for workers to analyze their practice, identify relevant skills and accomplishments, evaluate the impact of successful interventions and further capitalize the working strategies, methodologies and instruments used during these interventions
- the **organizational competence development strategy** and allocated resources. The transfer of competences among peers could also be a motivational strategy. This will require that employees are aware of their competences and are encouraged to provide their knowledge, skills and methods to others inside and outside the organization. Transparent certification of competences (both for internal and external uses) in order to develop a vocational portfolio of the employee. External, recognized certification is considered to be an advantage;

**Recommendation 6** - Beside competence assessment tools, managers could use appraisal talks and the establishment of employee's objectives to explore discuss his/her own competence goals. Also, feedback from a direct supervisor and peers, as well as theoretical background and the possibility to reflect are vital in bringing awareness regarding employee's competence level.

## Facilitating conditions for workplace learning

Learning needs "facilitating conditions" such as (1) an organizational culture based on learning, (2) a certain type of managers, (3) access to networks and (4) digital skills.

### 1. The key role of managers

The experts participating in the Delphi consultation created an **ideal profile of a welfare manager**.

---

<sup>3</sup> Experts emphasise the role of professional associations: they convey the idea that flexibility, adaptability and lifelong learning are the keys to finding motivation and an appropriate economic level for employees.

According to them, the main task of managers is to **create safe spaces for experimentation** and an environment where **every employee can feel listened to and truly participate**.

Their responsibility is to **create spaces for reflection and participation** and **collect the new ideas from staff members** for more successful and positive results at organizational level.

Social work is characterized by extremely challenging situations that bring additional risks of burden, fatigue, demotivation for workers. Therefore, work-based learning should not be only a learning opportunity for the staff members, but also the occasion for managers to **create a motivational environment**, where **people are encouraged to exchange ideas, solutions, feelings, doubts or successful strategies**.

The managers are responsible to create a setting for the **participation of all the workers** (by regularly creating moments dedicated to experiential sharing and not only sporadic or “una tantum” occasions, removing all communication barriers and motivating everyone to participate and express his/her point of view).

Managers should promote creative thinking and creative action, taking advantage of existing contexts (for instance case discussions) and include training in ongoing activities because this corresponds to how adults learn (when faced with a problem or the amazement of an unexpected discovery).

To do all that **managers should prioritize the development of their staff on long term, manifest creative thinking and excellent communication skills including feedback and coaching skills**.

## 2. Digital skills- the highway to learning

As the **Inventory of Future Skills 2030** developed within this project already showed, technology and digitalization should slow down and reduce the administrative efforts of social field professionals. They should then have more time to complete their more complex tasks, to work with the clients, gain time for thinking and reflecting, clearing their mind, relaxing and performing important dialogues.

At the same time, digitalization can be a very helpful and effective instrument for developing competences, for networking, for further education, for adapting workplaces to the “the world outside of social work” circumstances. Nevertheless it cannot replace the dialogue with a person in the same room – with all of body-communication, atmosphere, the experience of being really “there for someone”.

Experts think that workplace training needs to address two different elements:

- the readiness of social professionals to use technologies (their acquisition of basic digital skills, positive attitudes towards technologies and the understanding of safety rules related to data protection);
- the concrete abilities of professionals to use applications, innovative IT solutions and even artificial intelligence solutions for social work.

## Recommendations for a workplace learning policy

### For public authorities and decision makers

It is important to keep in mind that the **need for experiential learning stems from trying to cope with the great complexity of the social system. Workplace learning is not in conflict with the education system**.

In the social sector, the best workplace learning programs mix simulation, comparison between peers, and analytical discussion of cultural conflict. Cross-sectoral policies are needed, enhancing those services and programs that combine different modes of learning in a seamless experience.

**Central and local authorities could work like a "radar" by identifying innovation policies where they take place, certifying good practices and creating exchange programmes.**

The use of those levers with the effect of **facilitating learning in the workplace could mean the continuous training of managers, supporting the functioning of networks and professional associations, encouraging**

**and recognizing flexible learning pathways** (with the certification of skills) with results in increasing the motivation of professionals, **development of digital skills and awareness of the importance of digital transformation in the social sector.**

#### **Recommendations:**

- **Promoting these models of intervention** in the programs with systemic action, at national level, whether we are talking about those supported by structural funds, other international funding or programs funded from the state budget.
- **Monitoring compliance with the legal provisions on continuous training of employees** as a condition of service quality and **promoting quality in vocational training and adult education.**

#### **For organizations and educational institutions**

According to the conclusions of the consultations carried out within the project, workplace learning brings together theory and practice: theory must explain why and how practical decisions should be made, and the action highlights new topics that need conceptualization and systematic approaches.

What social professionals need to achieve through training are practical solution-oriented tools that allow them to “read” new trends and find the most effective and appropriate solutions, in a continuous dialogue with their colleagues, other professionals, supervisors, etc.

The best methodologies are related to examples and practical cases of social assistance: each new case and the innovative way in which it is managed produces experiential learning. Participants develop their expertise not only by acquiring technical skills or personal and social skills, but also by socializing in the workplace.

#### **Recommendations:**

Experts reason around three types of workplace programs:

- *Participatory programs*: cooperative and flat welfare organizations create learning programs in which the staff can discuss and “find a good time and good ways” to decide.
- *Scenario-based learning*: welfare organizations support learning methodologies such as case-based or problem-based activities, using interactive scenarios.
- *Evaluative programs*. Evaluation of social work activities is an essential aspect of delivering social care and services to users.

It is the responsibility of **learning institutions of all levels and types to support the level of reflection on their own work, openness to dialogue with other professionals, the ability to encourage the participation of beneficiaries / users, but also other professionals in evaluating services and thus contribute to the development of professionals aware of their value and that of their intervention in society.**

#### **For the organizations in social field**

**Social organizations should be aware of the fact that they need the following things:**

- Managers who “encourage participation”, “listen to the signals from the organization or from outside”, promote creative thinking and communication skills. The employees do not form on their own, but are “attracted” by a healthy organizational culture that promotes a balance between participation and supervision, continuous learning / growth, and creates safe spaces to experiment with new approaches.
- Real involvement in networks, coalitions to facilitate **access to technical resources and good practices, while advocating for policy changes (advocacy).** Professional associations are the first and most important partner in this regard.

- Understanding that digitalization does not come naturally, and that the skills of social professionals need to be developed, along with courageous openness and exploration.