



Miguel Peromingo, WAPES

## **Caring about skills**

Career Guidance and Public Employment Services

Skills are the currency of the world of work. People with good competencies are a valuable resource in all labour markets. The investment into skills development is an expensive but worthy transaction that has been given a lot of policy attention in the last decades. However, in today's ever-changing situation in the job market, having skills and qualifications might not be enough. Apart from being competent for performing a job, one needs to be highly adaptable. Successful approaches to employment services thus need to include helping people handle continuous changes in their job situation and master career transitions as a normal part of their working life.

The post-crisis phenomenon of high unemployment and skills shortage adds another expectation to employment services and career guidance:

According to a recent OECD study 25% of all OECD countries are concerned about the availability of adequate labour force. In sub-Saharan Africa over 40% of employers worry about not finding the right people, in Asia it is over half of the employers that struggle. At the same time one third of workers worldwide report that they could do more complex work at their job, if they got the chance.

Other 13% of workers believe that they are not skilled enough for their current job. Different types of skills mismatches seem to be a global concern.

Mobility has been discussed as a tool for combating the skills mismatch. The last ten years have seen the highest number of labour migrants ever recorded. For the first time in history more people are living in the city than in the countryside. The top-five fastest growing countries in the world are all in Africa. Employers there complain also, because a lot of young African people study in a university system



that has been designed to educate public sector personnel with little focus on the private sector. The discouragement through this structural mismatch can indeed coin generations of job starters as unemployable or drain the region of their skills potential.

On the other side, emerging countries like Vietnam have reduced the number of farm jobs from two thirds of the labour force to less than a half creating over 12 million new service jobs in the last couple of years. All this huge changes call for transitions in job careers and in guidance to identify skills, plan their development and deliver the transition.

Public employment services and other labour market actors are required to guide and support throughout the working-life with all kinds of career stations that might be on the way, not only unemployment or the start of a new job.

Most of the capacity invested into career guidance seems to go into taking vocational decisions or facilitating the job-start of young people. That sounds fair as young people nowadays, especially those eight million neither in employment, education or training are becoming a long-term vulnerable group that takes special attention to help them enter the job market and remain in it.

But what about guidance in later phases of the career? The business magazine *Forbes* states that the average number of career changes a person undergoes today is 3-5. Lifelong career guidance has never been more important.

A part of the changed social patterns that influence the labour market is that careers in one job are not lasting for a life-time anymore. Long-term contracts belong to the past, not only for young people. Career transitions have become the norm. Be it desired refocusing of the career path or unemployment that drive the career of the individual job life, life-long education, training and guidance represent an indispensable tool to organize one's career reality into an opportunity



of self-development rather than turning it into a nightmare of job-hunting or precarious life conditions.

In order to implement a practical approach of life-long guidance into the actual every-day work of labour market actors that support career decisions of their clients, three success factors are crucial.

First, the client has to be recognized as the manager of his/her own career in the first place, regardless whether he/she is a highly qualified job-changer or a vulnerable unemployed.

Everybody should be conceded the dignity (and responsibility) to decide what and how their individual career path should be paved. Public employment services around the world ought to especially invest into empowering citizens to be able to do so. This can be done for example by providing services that enable to build on existing transferrable skills and strengths and widen the possibility of autonomy for future career transitions. People need to approach their working life in a similar way as if it was a project or a business (even when they seek employment contracts). Public employment services can help them with developing the entrepreneurial competences, and most of all, the entrepreneurial attitude.

Transition into different job roles is an option with high potential, both for economies and for workers. As such, decision for a career change should never be treated as a professional failure. People should be aware it is an interesting option to consider, as their career can benefit from it.

Careers New Zealand, an entity governed by a board that reports to the Minister of Education of the country, structures their online and face-to-face offer by starting with what the job-seeker actually wants to do. This set of questions can be totally independent from the formal qualifications of the client, but builds on his/her skills and interests and thus opens the career management to creative changes. It is only after the steps of collecting career ideas, if there aren't any yet, and making a career decision that the job vacancies come into play. The job-search



like this equips the client with several alternatives and thus a broader range of options. Job vacancies follow the client and not the other way around.

Career management skills such as opportunity-awareness, decision-making and change management competence optimally also help the client to differ between own skills' development potential and the economic constraints that can limit career capacities.

Second, the persons providing life-long career guidance, for example within an employment service, have to be well-qualified advisors or coaches with a high level of career management skills themselves. The quality of career guidance has for a long time been associated with the expertise level of an advisor and the assurance that they were treating their clients in a fair (and legal) way. The focus on technical knowledge and a license to advise is nonetheless not sufficient to deliver quality career guidance for the global labour markets.

To empower the client and take into account the new patterns of the world of work today, it is necessary for the advisor to be a good example in using soft skills such as empathy, problem solving and intercultural competence. Knowledge of IT systems, labour market intelligence and legal frameworks can be even learned on the job, as they are less transversal than the actual skills to deal with people facing challenging milestones in their careers.

Unfortunately civil service recruitment can often limit a targeted human resource management of career advisors skills. Greater flexibility is needed in that case to either shape the skills of in-house advisors and/or to work with contracted mentoring solutions, especially when specific skills like psychology or social work are required to round off the career guidance service. A number of public employment services would also profit from increasing their rate of migrant advisors supporting migrant clients, disabled advisors for disabled clients etc.

Providing highly specializes career counselling services is not necessarily as expensive as it might seem in comparison with job placement: "giving" a client a



job can help them at that moment, but with nowadays short contracts, the same client is likely to need help soon again. In contrast, helping clients develop skills for seeking job, self-presentation and career transitions can actually reduce their demand for external help in the future.

In the United Kingdom, a country with a tradition of public-private partnership and positive discrimination in the delivery of career advice, a newly launched network called *LearnDirect Advice* allows clients to access a range of e-learning opportunities around career management or, if they so wish, get in touch with one of the 200 qualified advisors to get information on the online-courses, look for an apprenticeship for new skills, or coach them in the planning of their individual careers.

This approach also helps finding out what is the right balance between online and offline life-long guidance services offered.

Third, career guidance needs to be pragmatic. Since a better correlation between education and employment in the long-run would mean a costly restructuring of political and economic structures, policy discussions tend to get stuck in budget constraints. Public employment services and other operational organizations on the labour market are in a good position to smoothen the cooperation with educational institutes without changing laws or social security systems beforehand. Most public employment services already have a good network of training agencies, schools, universities, third sector entities and private advisors. Those networks can be used more strategically to help clients manage their careers and support the necessary transitions.

The Singapore employment service operates in the network Career Link Associates. The common mission of its members is to provide career-related services and to help meet training and other development needs. The network is



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jointly led by the Ministry of Manpower, the Ministry of Education, the Workforce Development Agency, and the National Library Board of Singapore.

In the Philippines, a private company called Career Systems is the main provider of career guidance since 1983. They offer all kinds of life-long career services in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour.

Career guidance can do all that: empower the client, increase the quality of human resources and increase the percentage of education effectiveness and employable citizens. In a way, career guidance helps to overcome a policy of being over-protective about job (-profiles) and focuses job-seekers to care about themselves and their skills. Instead of providing a one-time solution, it helps them develop skills they can leverage for the rest of their lives.

Plus it can help facilitate to increase the trust needed between employers and job-seekers to make recruitment efficient and sustainable.

Public employment services are at the heart of all those elements and should continue striving for a quality delivery of career guidance.