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DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT OF A CROSS-EUROPEAN EMPLOYABILITY TRAINING FOR OLDER JOBSEEKERS

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Abstract

The importance of social networking for effective job-search has been clearly established in various studies. Social networks (social capital) represent a constituent component of employability: the potential of an individual to gain employment and to stay employed. However, not everyone feels comfortable using informal search methods or networking. Besides, with the rise of social media, social networking increasingly takes place in online environments. To those less familiar with social media this constitutes an extra hurdle regarding effective deployment of informal job-search methods. As a consequence, especially older (45+) jobseekers are considered at risk of missing out on job opportunities.

The web2jobs project aims at providing a solution by developing a cross-European training on the use of social media for job search, targeting older jobseekers. This paper presents the requirements for such a training, as they evolved from a needs-assessment carried out in eight European countries. While starting with a focus on social media for job-search, the needs assessment made clear that the training should address other dimensions of employability, next to the social capital/social networking dimension, as well. The paper analyses the requirements derived from the needs assessment in terms of all four dimensions of employability (i.e. adaptability, human capital, social capital, and career identity) and argues that both adaptability and human capital on the one hand and social capital and career identity on the other hand, act in concert. Finally, the paper outlines the web2jobs employability training resulting from an iterative design and development process, involving two pilots running in eight countries.

Keywords: Employability, social media, social networks, etc.

1 EMPLOYABILITY AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

Employability can be defined as the potential of an individual to gain employment and to stay employed [1]. This potential, which is important both from a public (productivity) and a private (wellbeing) perspective, consists of a combination of an individual's personal adaptability, social capital, human capital and career identity [1], [2]. Personal adaptability refers to being willing and able to adjust to change and requires for instance an openness to learn. Social capital is determined by the quality and quantity of a person's social networks. Human capital includes a variety of factors like age, education, work experience, emotional intelligence etc. Career identity, finally, entails having a clear grasp of one's skills, work-related experience and aspirations. Recent research shows that each of these dimensions of employability plays a distinct role in the process of re-integration: adaptability is mainly important for people to persist in searching for a job; social and human capital for finding a job, and career-identity for both [1]. Though some authors have argued in favour of a more broad definition of employability, including for instance labour market variables such as the number of vacancies in a particular field [3], for the purpose of this paper the widely accepted definition distinguishing four aspects of employability, proves more useful, as will be demonstrated later.

The impact of the various constituent components of employability on an individual's potential to gain employment is not as straightforward as it may seem. Age, for instance - one of the variables related to human capital, is considered to be related to the amount of experience a person has. However, various studies have documented age discrimination in the labour market, putting both younger and older employees at a disadvantage [4], [5], [6]:

“In particular, older workers and those with low education levels have a higher displacement risk, take longer to get back into work and suffer greater (and more persistent) earnings losses in most countries examined. While youth also have a higher risk of displacement than prime-aged workers, they fare better afterwards. Young workers generally find work relatively quickly after displacement, often in jobs with greater skill requirements than their previous jobs.” [6, p.44].

The European Union 2020 Employment Strategy [7] specifically aims at increasing involvement of older workers in the labour force. Research shows that a substantial portion of job seekers secure jobs through social networks [8]. Social networks are used to provide and receive information about job opportunities. In addition, they enable us to alert people and organizations of our interests, skills, and availability. Today, this is no different from several decades ago. What has changed is that today both recruitment and social networking increasingly take place through social media, placing those unfamiliar with this technology at a disadvantage. And here once more, unemployed people over 45 are identified as an at risk group, either because they are less likely to use this technology (see section 2), or when they do use this technology, they tend to be less cautious in managing their online identity, as recent studies suggest [9], [10].

Against this background the web2jobs project [11] was initiated to develop an employability training programme to be used by adult educators and trainers across Europe with the aim to support 45+ unemployed people in their job search. The employability training described in this paper will address all four dimensions of employability with a focus on the social capital (social networks) dimension of employability, more specifically the use of social media for job search. Building on the needs assessment and the training requirements drawn from the needs assessment (section 2), this paper outlines the methodology used in the iterative design of the training (section 3), and concludes by presenting the training in its current stage and reflecting on both design and process so far (section 4).

2 NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The needs assessment carried out prior to designing the employability training course involved a mixed methods approach, including:

- desk research directed at national and regional policies and statistics on unemployment and social media use across the various countries involved in the web2jobs project: France, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, The Netherlands, Turkey, and United Kingdom [12]
- semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews with stakeholders to investigate needs and views more in-depth
- desk research investigating current insights based on studies in the field of employability.

The sections below provide some highlights derived from the needs assessment. For more details see the full report [12].

2.1 International comparison

2.1.1 Social media use

While internet access in the countries involved in the web2jobs project varies considerably (roughly from 50% to 95%) and, consequently, the percentage of people active on a social network site, there is great similarity regarding the most popular networking sites. Facebook and LinkedIn are most commonly used in all countries except Turkey where LinkedIn is less popular.

2.1.2 Policies

The desk research revealed that policies vary widely across the various countries with respect to whether or not older jobseekers are defined as a specific target group and, when they are, what measures are taken. In Turkey for example no special attention is paid to elderly unemployed: *“here subsidies are given to employers to encourage them to recruit or retain younger, not older workers”* [12, p.13].

However, in general policies directed at reducing the effects of age discrimination by employers have been set in place in all countries. The report distinguishes initiatives at three different levels: a. *large scale efforts* in France, Poland, The Netherlands, and United Kingdom with combined measures to

address 50+ unemployment, a *subsidy approach* focusing on economic incentives in Italy and Spain and a *generalistic approach* such as in Turkey.

In The Netherlands, for example, employers receive a so-called mobility bonus when they employ someone over 50. This means they pay reduced tax fees for these employees. There are also incentives for job agencies to encourage placement of older jobseekers. Another Dutch policy directly targets the elderly unemployed: if they receive unemployment benefits for more than three months they are obliged to enrol on an employability training course (including the use of social media for job search), if they want to continue to rely on these benefits. This obligatory training, which is quite unique, is provided by the Employee Insurance Agency (UWV); the organisation commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) to implement employee insurances nationwide through regional centres. Next to this compulsory training there is an abundance of face-to-face, online or blended training courses on social media in relation to career development and job search, provided for free or on a commercial base. Because of this abundance as well as the compulsory training for elderly unemployed, the needs assessment in the Netherlands included mainly trainers and trainees who have already delivered respectively received training in this area, providing an opportunity to learn from experiences so far.

2.2 Focus groups and interviews

The focus groups and interviews with individual trainers and older jobseekers carried out across the eight countries provided several clear clues regarding the contents and didactical design of an employability training programme. Firstly, both trainers and trainees generally expressed a preference for blended learning as the delivery mode: a mixture of face-to-face group sessions and self-study at a distance.

Secondly, according to trainers one of the main challenges in their training is to make participants feel comfortable with the notion of networking – to explain it as something that should come natural, rather than ‘a big deal’ that requires people to act in ways they do not feel comfortable with.

Thirdly, regarding the contents of the training it was stressed that an employability training course should not just address technical skills and know how (e.g. what are social media, how to create an account on LinkedIn) but also help trainees to develop the skills to use these media in a ‘generic’ way, i.e. in a way that enables them to cope with swift technological changes. Moreover, the training should help develop skills and attitudes needed to be more effective in employability contests, such as self-presentation and social networking skills.

Fourthly, perhaps more of a challenge than a clear requirement put forward by both trainers and trainees, concerns the wide diversity of participants taking part in employability programmes, in terms of prior knowledge and experience, education, and professional background. Though such diversity can enrich the training experience, it can also demotivate participants who consider the training pace does not align with their needs and competences. This suggests trainers need to find ways to accommodate a wide range of training needs, for instance through diversified exercises.

Finally, a recurring topic in the interviews with trainers and trainees in the Netherlands, concerned the negative impact of peer pressure, more specifically from fatalistic and discouraged group members, who insist 45+ jobseekers do not stand a chance. In Poland a similar discussion was raised but more specifically in relation to people in the pre-retirement group; people over sixty who have decided to bide their time until retirement. One Dutch trainee went as far as suggesting a fully online version of the training suitable for self-study would be best to avoid a negative impact from discouraged group members. However, as will become clear in the next section, the issue reappears in the review of employability research, offering suggestions for less drastic solutions.

2.3 Employability research

Current employability research was reviewed with the purpose of identifying requirements for an employability training course: what does research tell us about the “must haves” and “should haves” of training that aims to enhance employability? Obviously, the dimensions of employability identified by research in the field, suggest different aspects to address in an employability training course:

Table 1: Dimensions of employability

Employability dimension	Description
Adaptability	Attitude - being willing and able to adjust to change. Requires for instance an openness to learn.
Human capital	“Know how” - education, work experience, emotional intelligence
Social capital	“Know who” - the quality and quantity of a person’s social networks
Career identity	“Know thyself” - having a clear grasp of one’s skills, work-related experience and aspirations

A training course focusing on social networking for job search obviously is closely related to the social capital dimension of employability. However the needs assessment clearly indicates that such training inevitably involves technical skills and know how regarding the use of social media (human capital dimension) as well. This includes the issue mentioned earlier of prudent online identity management [9], [10]. Moreover, as the needs assessment indicated, the training should enable trainees to use the technology in a way that helps them to deal with rapidly changing interfaces (adaptability dimension). Furthermore, it goes without saying that social networking skills and self-presentation skills in the context of effective use of social media for job search, requires a clear idea of one’s own competences and aspirations (career identity dimension). Fig.1 provides a mapping of these training requirements onto the four dimensions of employability.

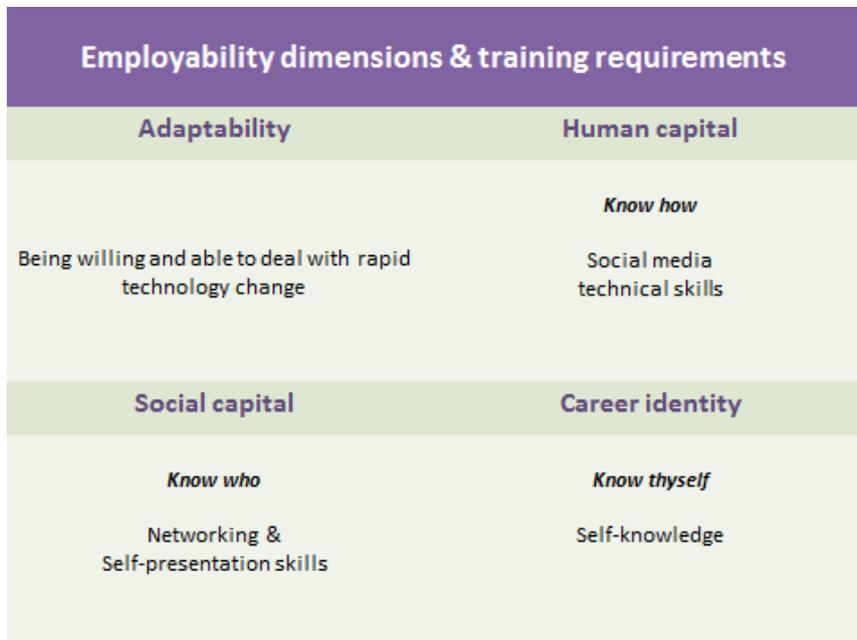


Fig. 1 Training requirements in relation to four dimensions of employability

Fig. 1 makes clear how, from the point of view of designing training on social networking for job search, adaptability and human capital on the one hand, and social capital and career-identity on the other hand operate ‘in concert’: trainees should not only know how to use social media (human capital), but in the case of social media it is of paramount importance that they should learn to do so in

a sustainable way, i.e. in a way that prepares them to deal with rapid change. Likewise, there is little sense in developing social networking skills for professional purposes when this is not supported by a clear career identity: a proper sense of one's own competences, aspirations, weaknesses etc.

For people who are unemployed career identity is under severe pressure. When expectations of future work diminish people are likely to adjust the value they place on work and career. As the theory of cognitive dissonance [13] explains, it is virtually impossible for people who are unemployed, especially in the long run, to sustain a self-image that says that being employed is essential for their well-being, without this being detrimental to their sense of well-being. This is a liability for all jobseekers, however in the case of older jobseekers this tendency might even be reinforced by what is called minority socialization and identification [14]. This is exactly what both trainers and trainees were referring to in the interviews when they talked about the negative influence of participants oozing fatalism. Due to prolonged exposure to media and/or fellow trainees who keep stressing that chances of 45+ jobseekers to re-integrate in the labour market are extremely dim, people might start to identify with this 'stigma' to an extent that they become discouraged workers. Though figures clearly indicate older people are at a disadvantage when it comes to regaining employment and there is no use in denying this, it is still important to distinguish overall statistics from personal experience. Older job seekers may be at a disadvantage but there are still those who do succeed and it is important to present a realistic image of the situation, e.g. that it may require effort and resilience, while pointing out that it is not impossible and that to keep making efforts may pay off in the end [14], [15]. The study carried out by Koen indicates that people who have a stronger career identity are more resilient in their search for a job and also more likely to find a job [1].

Interestingly, Koen's study also shows that the (relatively small) effect of re-integration programmes on employability, was found even when the integration programme was compulsory. However, an important mitigating variable was whether or not participants perceive a programme as useful - a crucial factor for their motivation. This implies that next to the 'know how', 'know who' and 'know thyself' the employability training should pay sufficient attention to the 'know why'.

Last but not least, current employability studies indicate that using a varied job search strategy (e.g. combining the use of social media with more traditional ways such as browsing databases with vacancies) appears most effective [8].

Section 4 explains in more detail which requirements identified through the needs assessment and desk research have been addressed through the web2jobs employability training and how. Prior to this, the next section briefly describes the methodology, i.e. the iterative process, through which the web2jobs training was developed.

3 METHODOLOGY

Based on the desk research and needs assessment an initial training design was created collaboratively, consisting of 8¹ training modules, each taking approximately 4 hours in a blended learning setting (group sessions combined with self-study). A modular blended learning design was chosen to facilitate personalisation, i.e. adaptation of the training according to local or personal needs and preferences of both trainers and trainees. Delivery of the training takes place through an E-platform that was build on the Elgg open source social networking engine [16], [17], and adapted so that it supports delivery of the training in each partner country.

Each partner was assigned 1 module. Next, syllabus information was filled out for each module in order to avoid overlap. The syllabus information to be provided included: Title, keywords, introductory subjects/preconditions, course objectives and aims, learning outcomes, topic content, and literature.

Following this step all partners developed an English version of the module they had been assigned. These initial designs were then subject to peer-review, which, for reasons of efficiency, was organised in such a way that each partner reviewed three modules.

This round of peer review was particularly useful to identify overlap between modules. Also, a quite common feedback was that contents appeared to outstretch 4 hours of study by far. Modules where

¹ Two additional modules were designed to support the training of trainers in charge of delivering the training to end-users: one instructing on the use of the delivery platform, and one for novice trainers on methodologies in adult learning. Whereas the overall aim of the web2jobs project was to design a train-the-trainer programme, the focus of this paper is on the training as delivered to end-users.

revised and, again for pragmatic reasons, divided among partners so that each partner would translate at least three modules to be used in a first pilot with trainers. The division of modules across partners was such that each module was included in the first pilot in at least three different countries.

Main adjustments suggested by the findings in the first pilot were: 1. Simplify modules in several respects: less text, less terminology, lower thresholds 2. For basic ICT skills (e.g. create an account) refer to available tutorials so that more attention can be paid to 'know how to use for job search' and overlap is reduced 3. Provide more exercises 4. Improve reflection on learning through self-assessment / checks of learning 4. Ensure a more consistent look and feel across modules.

Following this feedback a template (Fig. 2) was designed to guide the redesign of the modules, describing constituent parts and stressing the job search aspect. Moreover, workbook and PowerPoint templates were designed to be used for exercises and presentations.



Fig. 2 web2jobs module template

Fig. 2 illustrates a shift not only from 'technical' know how, to 'use for job search' but also a greater emphasis on exercises and checks for understanding and learning.

The adapted modules are currently being evaluated by trainers in a second pilot. A third and final pilot is planned in which the trainers will deliver the training to end-users to collect their feedback on the training.

The next section describes the overall web2jobs training design in its current stage of development, i.e. prior to pilot 2, and explains how the modules relate to the various employability dimensions outlined in section 2.

4 CONCLUSION: THE WEB2JOBS TRAINING TO DATE

Fig 3. maps the web2jobs training modules on the four dimensions of employability and the additionally defined aspect of 'Knowing why'. The modules are not ordered, as trainers are meant to be free to select a subset to be included in their training according to specific needs. However, some order is suggested of course in the sense that the 'Know why' question requires attention at the beginning of the training course. The module "Why web2.0 technology for job search" addresses this question.

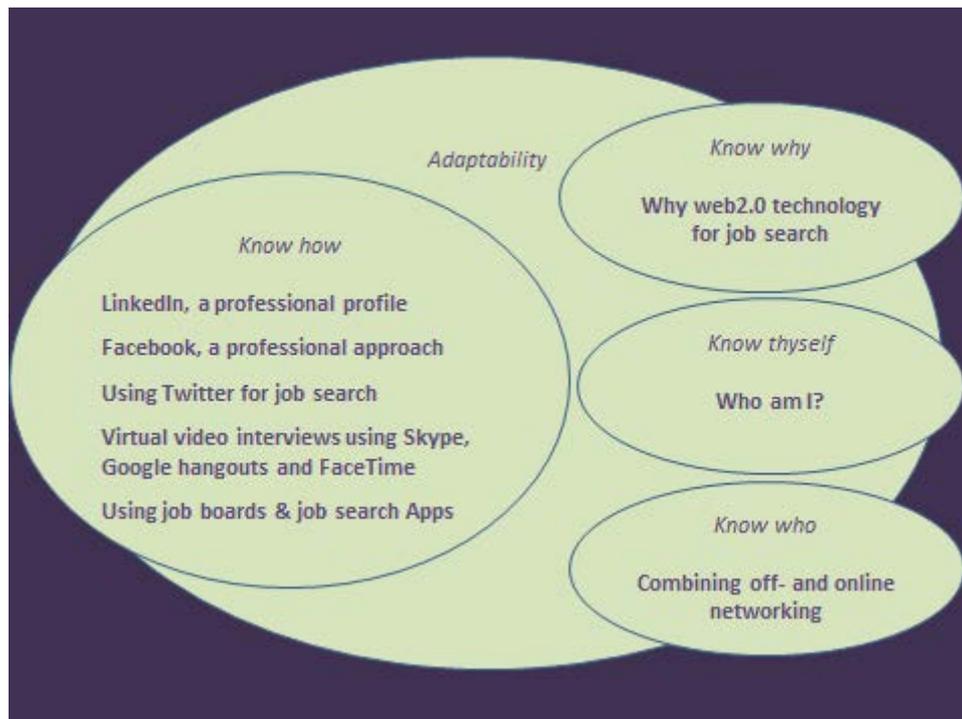


Fig 3. Web2jobs training modules

The 'Know who' dimension is covered by the module "Combining off- and online networking" which deals with the concept of networking in 'non-intimidating' way, as something we all do, but perhaps without being aware of it, and which introduces online networking as a useful extension of existing, face-to-face, networks. In addition the 'Who am I' module helps trainees to practise with and reflect upon how they may present themselves and what impacts this has. Most modules are dedicated to the 'Know How' of using the most popular social media as well as other tools to search and/or apply for jobs. The figure illustrates how the attitudinal dimension of employability 'adaptability' is not separately addressed by a particular module but is underlying all modules, and is supposed to be addressed in various ways throughout the training. So the 'Why web2.0 technology for job search' for instance, is meant to enhance trainees motivation and openness to learn. Also, various social media addressed in the 'Know how' modules are covered in such a way that trainees understand their generic use and learn to "see through" the peculiarities of successive interface designs.

Reflecting on the iterative design process so far it appears to be characterized by three major shifts. Firstly, the needs assessment has inspired a shift from social media particularly to employability more generally. Secondly, feedback gathered in the first pilot has inspired a shift, which in terms of Bloom's taxonomy [18], can be characterized as a shift towards applying knowledge as is reflected by a stronger focus on job search and exercises. Finally, the web2jobs training in its current state places greater emphasis on metacognitive skills through self-assessments and checks of understanding.

Of course the feedback collected from end-users in the final pilot, will have to reveal to what extent the aims are achieved as intended.

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