ESF 20: Training and Support for Labour Market Integration of Socially Excluded Persons

"I came to know better where to search for vacancies, even by using resources available at home such as a directory."

"These sessions helped me find alternative ways of job-seeking, such as browsing through newspapers and internet as well as directly visiting companies. In fact I managed to personally visit and ask for possibilities."

"These sessions helped me to understand that I was not moving in the right track in my job seeking. Thus I started considering other jobs."

"Even if I don't find a job, this service helped me understand what I should do. Through courage and necessary guidance offered, I started phoning and asking out so as to find a job."

"Finally I found someone who can listen and understand."

"This is a service which was unknown to us and which we found useful."

These are some comments provided by participants of the ESF 20 project: Training and Support for Labour Market Integration of Socially Excluded Persons, funded by the European Social Fund. This project was built around the reality that having and retaining a job is a social right that gives dignity to the person and a certain amount of independence on the person's future. The aim of this project was to empower individuals and make them realize their potential by engaging in productive and rewarding employment, especially in order to decrease the risks of social exclusion and poverty. The project leader for ESF 20 was Agenzija Appogg, within the Foundation for Social Welfare Services, in collaboration with Employment and Training Corporation.

The project consisted of 3 phases, with the first stage seeing to the training of staff from the Foundation for Social Welfare Services and other professionals from NGOs, in supporting individuals when preparing for work interviews, how to provide them with assistance, how to carry out advocacy with employers and how to help clients and employers access ETC schemes that facilitate the employment of the above mentioned individuals.

The second phase of the project consisted of dissemination of information about the project including information packs for mentors and beneficiaries; the third stage consisted of the social mentoring phase with persons seeking employment in collaboration with the Employment and Training Corporation.

Training Provided

The initial stage of the project provided training to over 200 social workers and other frontline workers. Main topics dealt with included the development of their skills in order to facilitate the integration of their clients into the labour market, and the development of their knowledge of vocational training and job opportunities available.

This training given to frontline workers aimed at bringing *at par* the socially excluded persons with other non-excluded individuals, especially when competing for the same jobs in the open labour market. Such groups, include youths living or leaving children's homes or foster care, persons who were traumatized in childhood or adolescence through experiences of abuse, single parents, victims of domestic violence, persons with a disability and/or mental health problems, persons who have been in correctional facilities and therapeutic centres, homeless people and asylum seekers.

These groups of people, together with professionals working with them or in the field, had identified traits in the labour market that tended to disadvantage vulnerable groups. Thus the need for this training was felt in order to support such people in gaining and retaining employment while at the same time educate society at large, including employers, in order to facilitate their integration into gainful employment.

Dissemination of Information

Information packs were designed to serve as tools to beneficiaries of the project. These packs consisted of information and contacts of services beneficiaries could access, such as support services for single parents, social housing, employment and training schemes and health services.

Another pack produced and disseminated amongst beneficiaries contains information about ways to produce a profile, a curriculum vitae, interview tips, submitting applications and references for a job, and other such information aimed to help an applicant better his/her chances when looking for employment. The guidelines have been produced in a way to be as user-friendly as possible, compact and handy.

Social Mentoring

The third phase of ESF 20 was that of social mentoring. The candidates for this project, mentees, where selected through the Employment and Training Corporation as well as through an open call in local newspapers and other media. The ETC's Employment Advisors pointed out individuals who had been registering for employment and actively seeking employment for a substantial amount of time and, could still not find employment due to some kind of barriers independent from their will. The clients who could best benefit from the programme were selected, through regular meetings with the clients in order to identify the needs and difficulties being faced.

The mentoring process involved a number of social mentors who gave personalized attention to the project participants on a one-to-one basis. Due to caseload size and time limitations, it is physically impossible for the ETC Employment Advisors to be present in every situation encountered by the job seekers, like when attending interviews or in situations when they need extra support. The project filled this gap through interventions of the ESF social mentors.

The social mentors provided an added value and extra hand to the personal 'job-seeking' action plan defined between the employment advisor and the job seeker. Social mentoring is valuable because it works with clients holistically by taking in consideration their psycho-social situation. Mentoring contributes towards submitting fresh ideas on the client's situation especially in cases of long term unemployment. It is also essential to develop the necessary contacts with employers and service providers.

Throughout the project, it was important for the social mentor to get to know the mentee better so as to be able to identify his/her needs and goals with regards to employment possibilities. Another role was that of assessing the abilities, skills and qualifications of the mentee to match them with current labour opportunities.

The mentees where in turn provided with ideas about methods to adopt and resources to be used in job-seeking, guidance in CV writing and formulating a covering letter, guidelines on how to build a portfolio, suggestions on how to contact and approach employers and finally tips on performing effectively during an interview.

Project Outcomes

The project helped mentees to improve their self esteem, thus empowering them to move towards a more positive attitude in their overall life. They discovered new career possibilities, learned new skills and found new methods of job-seeking.

133 mentees started using this project out of which 67 successfully completed all the mentoring sessions. Out of these mentees, 58 decided to further their studies, kept their current employment or else found a new employment, while the other 9 kept their commitment throughout the mentoring phase even though they are still currently looking for gainful employment or further training.

This experience was a very positive one, and the response and interest was very high, both from the social mentors and the menteees, especially given that all those who received assistance did so on a voluntary basis. The participants who benefited from such project came from various walks of life with diverse backgrounds, qualifications and experiences. The real success of this project should not be measured by simple statistics but by individual successes, even if these include small steps ahead.

Information and presentations from the ESF20 Concluding Seminar can be viewed at http://www.appogg.gov.mt/downloads_presentations.asp.

This article is provided by the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which incorporates Agenzija Appogg (www.appogg.gov.mt), Agenzija sedqa (www.sedqa.gov.m) and Agenzija Sapport (www.sapport.gov.mt).