Empowering Public Employment Service Practitioners' peer facilitation with peer coaching training

Carmen Wolf[1], Teresa Schaefer[2], Katarina Ćurković[3], Tanja Vlahović[4], Angela Rees[5], Juliet Tschank[2]

[1]Karlsruhe University of Technology (KIT), [2]Centre for Social Innovation (ZSI), Austria, [3]Croatian Employment Service, [4]Agency for Regional Development of the Republic of Croatia, [5]Pontydysgu Ltd., Wales. Contact email: carmen.wolf@kit.edu

Abstract

In a changing world of work with high youth unemployment rates, an ageing society and flexible work force, practitioners in Public Employment Services need to cope with continually growing demands. In this paper we present the EmployID project which introduced a blended learning approach for Public Employment Services in Croatia, designed to support professional identity transformation through peer facilitation and learning. The evaluation shows that learners benefited from higher knowledge and skills development related to peer coaching, along with an increase in activities related to collaborative, reflective learning.

Keywords: peer coaching, training, public employment service, facilitation, professional identity transformation

Introduction: Learning and identity development in European Public Employment Services

A globalised and digitalised world is not only well-connected and offers many opportunities to employers and employees, but it also leads to increasingly complex challenges that need to be dealt with. It is not only individuals who struggle to find solutions for their individual problems; some challenges are overarching, affecting larger groups of people, whole organisations and groups of organisations and therefore need common solutions. Public Employment Service (PES) practitioners in Europe face challenges that are in most cases very contextualised and specific to each country, but some of their issues can be seen as global topics relevant across different countries. According to a national study by Mueller (2013) on coaching and supervision in German job centres, some of the challenges that supervisors and coaches of PES practitioners identify as affecting practitioners include: work pressure, low job satisfaction, large number of cases (clients), uncertainties in decision-making, lack of health protection and pressure in private life created by work-related challenges. In addition European PESs struggle with a mismatch between skill demand and supply, with the emphasis on an individualised client approach and working with hard-to-reach clients (PES, 2012). There is a change from classical counselling to a more coaching-like approach which focuses on asking questions rather than giving advice (ibid.). Modern guidance counselling concepts and individualised approaches for each client are required, as well as new skills on how to address the rising tensions between daily routine and political expectations.

To respond to these challenges, practitioners, but also PES management, need to continuously improve on their already existing knowledge and adopt new methods, tools and approaches in dealing with clients and changing work procedures. Changes are fundamental and concern how

PES practitioners perceive and fulfil their professional role, as well as how they are perceived by others. It is about transforming professional identities, where socialisation, interaction and learning are key elements and individuals take on aspects of existing identities and roles, whilst actively reshaping other aspects in a dynamic way, according to changes in their professional environment.

According to Brown & Bimrose (2014) learning and identity development takes place across four domains: (i) "relational development" learning takes place through interactions at work and learning from and with others (ii) "technical skill development" involves learning through mastery of an appropriate knowledge base and technical up-skilling (iii) "practical development" learning occurs on the job, through critical inquiry of ones work and through challenging work and (iv) "emotional development" learning takes place through greater reflexivity that leads to greater self-understanding and empathy. Learning and identity development may involve development in one or more, or in all four domains.

Thus learning is an essential part of PES practitioners' work, and new forms of collaborative learning with peers, as well as across hierarchies, promise to support the demand. More effective forms of learning tend to increasingly move away from traditional training models that build on asymmetry between the learner and the "guider" or "coach" (Boud & Middleton, 2003).

Peer coaching skills, methods and processes are one of the ways of developing across the four domains of identity transformation by fostering a structured form of facilitation amongst colleagues, building resilience of staff and their acceptance of new circumstances in the labour market.

This article explains the blended learning approach (a combination of face-to-face and online training) for peer coaching at the PES in Croatia, hereafter referred to as the CES (Croatia Employment Services). The approach was developed by the EmployID Consortium (2017) as part of the EmployID project. In particular this article explores how the CES programme supports the learning and identity development of practitioners, how the peer coach training increased technical knowledge of the peer coaching process, and how it enhanced skill development. In addition it shows how the activities fostered collaborative and reflective learning activities of the practitioners in their professional identity transformation processes (relational, practical and emotional development).

Motivation for peer coaching in the Croatian Employment Service

The Croatian Employment Service (CES) invests a lot of effort and resources into the creation and improvement of an internal training system for its employees to continually up-skill them. Training is designed according to the identified needs of the employees and introduces new methods, measures and ways of working in the regional offices. These trainings are delivered face-to-face and via an e-learning portal – thus widening the use of the blended learning approach among CES employees. When the project EmployID started to investigate the current facilitation requirements for professional identity transformation in CES, practitioners emphasised the need for peer coaching that could help them in finding constructive ways of addressing their daily work challenges and continually improving on their practice. Initial discussions with PES practitioners and their managers revealed that continuous learning, networking, teamwork, improved communication and usage of e-communication/interactive platforms are key challenges for their roles anticipated up to 2020, and that counselling and reflection skills are among others reported as being essential.

Peer coaching concept and training

The term "peer coaching" is often used ambiguously. Sometimes it is a form of mutual observation or the act of giving and receiving feedback between two equally ranked partners as implemented by teachers in schools (Sparks & Bruder, 1987), for example the observation of teaching and learning programme in the UK (Manahl & Tschank, 2016). However in the EmployID project and

this article, peer coaching is understood as a special type of group coaching "carried out among colleagues. The members of the group take turns in adopting the role of the coach and thus provide coaching to each other" (Ajdukovic et al.., 2015, p. 37).

Peer coaching is used by business enterprises and supplements coaching with an external professional coach, because it is efficient, time-saving and easy to learn (Pabst, 2016). In addition Ladyshewsky (2016, p.6) argues that peer coaching "can enhance the professional development and performance of individuals".

Peer coaching in EmployID implies three roles: (i) the "client" who presents a specific work challenge (ii) the "peer coaching facilitator" who moderates the process and asks the client "powerful questions" and (iii) the "advisors" who bring in their experiences and opinions in two steps of the peer coaching process. The three roles help to support the client in finding a solution that fits their individual circumstances. The peer coaching group members are colleagues with a common professional focus and are of equal rank. All members of the group are trained in peer coaching and agree upon a code of ethics and rules that the whole group develops together in advance. Figure 1 sets out the stages of the EmployID peer coaching process and is explained in more detail below.

Figure 1: EmployID peer coaching process
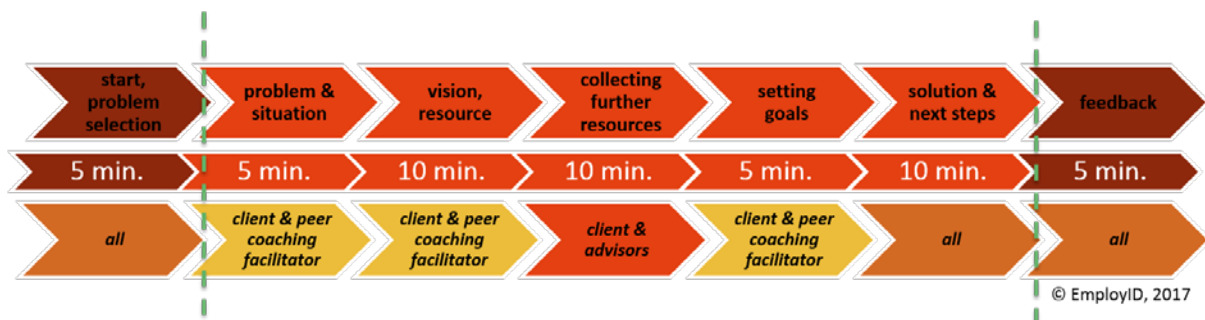
Based on Berg and Berninger-Schaefer (2010), Berninger-Schaefer (2011) and Lippmann (2013) (see also Schmidt and Kunzmann, 2016). Adapted with the kind permission of EmployID.

In the first phase of the peer coaching process, "start, problem selection", participants decide who will present their challenge (the client) and who of the team will take on the other roles (peer coaching facilitator and advisors). Following the initial division of roles, in phase two, "problem & situation", the client describes their challenge and is supported by questions from the peer coaching facilitator. Since the approach is solution-focused (Cavanagh & Grant, 2014), the peer coaching facilitator invites the client to a solution-supporting vision in the "vision, resource" step. This can be done by focusing on resources, e.g. moments of great strength, which can be expanded by the advisors in the subsequent phase, "collecting further resources". The client is asked to set a goal for the session to support them in dealing with the challenge phase, "setting goals", and all participants of the peer coaching session are invited to brainstorm on possible solutions to reach this goal in the "solution & next step" phase. After considering the solutions presented, the peer coaching facilitator supports the client in setting up actions to implement the selected solution(s). The last step of the peer coaching process, "feedback", is started after the actual peer coaching session is closed and is reserved for group feedback about learning outcomes and benefits for the individual participants (Wolf & Gidion 2016; Schmidt & Kunzmann, 2016; Wolf & Gidion 2017). As highlighted at Figure 1 the concept of EmployID peer coaching is influenced by the concepts of Berg and Berninger-Schaefer (2010), Berninger-Schaefer (2011) and the processes described in Lippmann (2013). All have in common that the peer coaching setting is a group setting with more than two participants. For the EmployID peer coaching process a group of eight participants is ideal in order to receive a good number of resources and solutions.

Those learning the peer coaching process not only need to understand the steps and roles before practicing it (Hooker, 2014), they also need to apply some practical core skills that support the process: active listening, emotional awareness, powerful questioning and growth mind-set awareness. Therefore when developing the peer coaching training in EmployID the objective was to provide a concrete concept of peer coaching with a opportunities to put the newly gained theoretical knowledge into practice.

This procedure of introducing peer coaching is shown also by Huston and Weaver (2008) who offered training of peer coaching process and skills for reciprocal peer coaching (two-person) of mid-career and senior faculty members in Higher Education. Ladyshewsky (2014) highlights limitations in peer coaching, these are related to the skills base of the coach as they both preparation and the support of their organisation. Lippmann (2013) gives examples of the implementation of peer coaching in organizations where training of the process is essential and Berg and Berninger-Schaefer (2010) underline the need of training for process control and communication techniques.

The EmployID programme utilised a blended learning approach, using face-to-face training and online training. This provided the learners with some autonomy around their learning, so that they could choose for themselves how deep, how often and how quick they explored the learning content provided. Berninger-Schaefer (2012) introduces a similar way of developing peer coaches where the participants gain knowledge on peer coaching in addition to a one-day workshop for practice.

Methodology

Research questions

This paper introduces the blended learning approach for used for developing peer coaching in the CES and shows the pivotal role training already plays for peer support and facilitation of colleagues. The research aimed to provide insights into the effects of the collaborative peer coaching learning experience on the involved individuals with regard to the participants' identity development, as well as identifying their motivation and confidence to apply the new practice in their daily work context.

Participants

Participation in the peer coaching training was on a voluntary basis, but the Croatian Psychological Chamber agreed on giving credits to the participants upon successful completion of the course. Thus 29 experienced, professional practitioners and managers from local, regional and central offices of CES (n= 26: 98.7% female) participated in the face-to-face one-day launch workshop. A group of 89 participants (n= 81: 91% female) partook in the online course, of which 78 (n= 72: 92.3% female) completed the course. Of those who completed the course 18 had already participated in the launch workshop (n= 17: 94.4% female).

Sixty three of the 78 completed both the pre- and the post-test questionnaires; 12 of these had taken part in both the launch workshop and the online course. These 63 responses allowed for a comparison prior to the training and after completing the course.

Course design and involvement process

The peer coaching training was introduced by CES management and a one-day face-to-face launch workshop took place in May 2016 followed by a three-week online course which commenced at the end of May 2016. To ensure that all of the participants were able to complete the course's obligatory tasks, two additional weeks were granted to finish the course.

EmployID face-to-face launch workshop

The face-to-face launch workshop was aimed at management and practitioners and was designed to inform them about the EmployID project, introduce the concept of peer coaching, the benefits, and the relevance for practice. The process of EmployID peer coaching was explained and the core peer coaching skills were developed by involving the learners in brief practical exercises. Learners also practiced the whole peer coaching process once, shared their experiences and discussed the relevance of peer coaching for their work. The launch meeting provided an opportunity for learners to collect initial theoretical and practical insights into the peer coaching process, along with the required core skills. It was also a place for the learners to build relationships and rapport with each other. From earlier project activities it became clear that people with limited experience in online learning asked for some initial personal contact with tutors and the other learners in order to help them to feel more comfortable in engaging with the same learners in the online environment.

EmployID online course

The online course is available on the open EmployID Academy (http://mooc.employid.eu/) which is an online platform based on WordPress. The online course is structured in a similar manner to a classic Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) with content divided into weeks. Although much of the content is publically available, the courses for the PESs are closed and private to allow and foster frank and open discussion amongst participants. Two five-week pilots of the peer coaching online course took place before being condensed to a more manageable three-week online course specifically designed for the CES. The online course includes: written text, videos, graphs, personal tests, comics and the opportunity to discuss the content with colleagues via a forum or comments section. Experts in EmployID peer coaching, PES and technical staff tutored the discussions.

In the first week the CES participants were introduced to business coaching, peer coaching in general, the EmployID peer coaching process and the code of ethics for coaching and peer coaching. In week two, the focus lied on the five core peer coaching skills identified through several expert evaluations within the project: knowledge of the peer coaching process, active listening, emotional awareness, powerful questioning and growth mind-set awareness. All of these skills required practice for mastery and, as a result, they were a precondition as well as a planned outcome of the course. In the third week, the participants were required to demonstrate their knowledge through an online test and by working on a case study. In addition, they were introduced to possible ways of forming a peer coaching group themselves. Participants had to complete mandatory tasks every week. The completion of the weekly tasks resulted in digital badges, visible signs for successful achievement and motivation to continue. At the end, the participants received a peer coaching course completion badge and an official certificate.

The online course provided the same content as the launch workshop and built on this by providing more time to learn and exchange thoughts with colleagues, as well as including additional exercises. Due to the wide range of learning material and information provided, both at the face-to-face workshop and the online course, participants were equipped to create their own peer coaching groups with colleagues. Completing the course meant that learners could potentially practice peer coaching in their daily work as part of their regular training, and/or they could utilise the approach to enhance regular meetings or case analysis.

Evaluation instruments and procedure

The evaluation of the peer coaching training in CES had two foci: on the one hand, it aimed to investigate the extent to which the peer coaching intervention (launch workshop and online training) supported the participants' professional identity transformation. Secondly, it sought to

uncover the participants' motivation to get involved in peer coaching, as well as their perception of the usefulness of the training.

Professional identity transformation is a concept that has so far mainly been investigated via qualitative methods, which collect narratives about occupational contexts, learning and skill developments as well as individual characteristics that shape a person's career transition and continued positive engagement with work and employment (Kirpal, 2011; Heinz, 2010; Berg, 2006). In EmployID the aim was to understand the influence of specific interventions on professional identity transformation, both via narratives but also through quantitative approaches. As a result, the self-assessment questionnaire was developed around four categories, through which learning for identity development could be represented as occurring (Brown & Bimrose, 2014). The four categories were: (i) technical skill development (ii) practical development (iii) relational development and (iv) emotional development (e.g. resilience). Indicators for each of these categories were developed in close cooperation between the involved PES, the experts for evaluation within the project and experts in identity transformation.

The questions provided respondents with the opportunity to assess the frequency at which they get involved in activities related to these four categories, as well as the perceived importance of these activities at two time points: prior to the involvement in the peer coaching training (pre-test) and at the end of the training (post-test)

The self-assessment questionnaire was subject to a survey pilot prior to its implementation. To increase the comprehensibility and validity of the questionnaire, cognitive pre-tests also known as comprehension probing (Pruefer & Rexroth, 2000) were conducted with three participants. This method of survey pre-testing involves the following techniques, which were also implemented the EmployID project: thinking aloud, probing, confidence rating and paraphrasing. The final version of the questionnaire was uploaded onto the online survey tool LimeSurvey whose link was provided to the participants of the peer coaching intervention for both measurements.

The pre-test was distributed at the beginning of the launch workshop and the link was also provided at the beginning of the online course for those who had not taken part in the launch workshop. The link to the post-test, which was identical to the pre-test except for some additional questions, was provided to the participants at the end of the online course.

The additional items of the post-test related to the usefulness of the training for the participants' day-to-day work, their confidence and motivation to get involved in peer coaching and their further training needs. The questionnaires were filled-in anonymously, without demographic data of the participants. Privacy aspects were key in the given organisational environment and in this small group of learners certain demographic data could have revealed some participants' identities. To facilitate matching each participant's pre-test to the post-test, respondents generated their own unique code. The code system worked well as about 93% (n= 63) of the completed 68 post-questionnaires could be matched.

The results presented in the section below represent those from the 63 participants whose pre-test and post-test could be matched, regardless of whether or not they had taken part in the launch workshop. Although group differences between launch workshop participants and non-participants were expected and even analysed, they are not presented in this paper due to the low sample size; 27 participants took part in the launch workshop, however only 12 of them had a pre-test and post-test score.

The answers to the open questions that relate to the usefulness of learning content ,as well as those relating to further training needs, were analysed based on the inductive way of analysing content which is proposed by Mayring (2000).

Although the design of this study in comparison to a one-group post-test-only design increases the ability of the model to provide counterfactual inference, the lack of a control group implies that it can only do this to a small extent (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). This is due to the fact that external factors cannot be completely ruled out as having influenced or even caused the results. At the same time, the fact that the pre-test and post-test were completed between three and five weeks of each other, which is considered a short period in duration, increased causal inference that the EmployID intervention caused the observed effects.

Besides quantitatively evaluating the effectiveness of EmployID's peer coaching training through a one-group pre- and post-test design, the course's evaluation was enhanced qualitatively through open questions in the self-assessment questionnaire, metadata (logging-data) and discussions among the participants in specially created forums, as well as from the comment section of the online course. The qualitative content analysis of the discussions generated from the course is still ongoing. This paper presents the results from the self-assessment questionnaires only.

Results

The underlying predictions of the statistical analysis were that participants become more frequently involved in activities relating to the four categories of professional identity transformation after the peer coaching intervention than before. As a result of these predictions, which are directional (increase in frequency of activities after the intervention), a one-tailed probability is used throughout the analyses below. In order to compare the participants' responses from the pre-test to the post-test for statistical differences, the non-parametric test, Wilcoxon signed-rank test, was used. The difference between post scores and pre scores was not normally distributed, as confirmed by Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests (Field, 2013), and the rating scale for the questionnaire was ordinal (5-point Likert scale from "not at all" to "very often"). Consequently the results violated some of the main assumptions of using parametric tests and therefore the equivalent parametric test for the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, the paired t-test, was ruled out.

The null hypothesis for the test was:

Null hypothesis (H_o) – There is no statistically significant difference in the frequency of the participants getting involved in activities supporting professional identity transformation from the time of the pre-test to the time of the post-test.

Alternative hypothesis (H_1) – There is an increase in the frequency of the participants getting involved in activities supporting professional identity transformation from the pre-test to the post-test.

Altogether 15 activities supporting professional identity transformation were subjected to the statistical analyses. Among these, the change in frequency of carrying out eight of the activities from the pre-test to the post-test, show significance levels below the conventional level of significance ($p < .05$) for 1-tailed significance testing and as a result, warrant the rejection of the null hypothesis. In seven of these items, the frequency of carrying out the relevant activities is significantly higher at the post-test than at the pre-test and therefore required the acceptance of the alternative hypothesis.

For one item (Item 6: "I actively listen to colleagues and clients"), the change was in the opposite direction: participants indicated that their frequency in carrying out this activity was significantly higher before the intervention than afterwards. The effect size of the changes in these eight items range from .16 to .36; representing small to medium change based on Cohen's benchmark of effect size: $r = .1$ (small effect), $r = .3$ (medium) and $r = .5$ (large) (as cited in Field & Hole, 2003). In seven of the 15 items of the self-assessment questionnaire, there is no significant change in the

frequency of carrying out the related activities from the pre-test to the post-test. Figure 2 below lists the items relating to activities supporting professional identity transformation and the changes in frequency of activities supporting professional identity transformation are set out in Figure 3.

Figure 2: List of items relating to activities supporting professional identity transformation

How often do you apply this behaviour in your daily work?

Technical skill dev.	Item 1	I gain relevant knowledge and skills through on-the-job trainings to meet changing requirements.
Relational development	Item 2	I help colleagues in times of difficulties by asking them questions that support them in finding their own solution.
	Item 3	I help clients in times of difficulties by asking them questions that support them in Finding their own solution.
	Item 4	I directly ask my colleagues for feedback to my work.
	Item 5	I discuss with my colleagues possible solutions to work-related challenges.
	Item 6	I actively listen to colleagues and clients.
	Item 7	I carefully read the comments from colleagues and clients
	Item 8	I organize information, based on exchanges with colleagues and clients.
Emotional development	Item 9	I learn from thinking about past activities.
	Item 10	I remain positive in difficult situations.
	Item 11	I actively deal with my feelings in work situations.
	Item 12	I support my colleagues by addressing their feelings regarding work-related challenges.
	Item 13	I effectively coach colleagues in practice.

Of all the seven items of the self-assessment questionnaire, showing a statistically significant positive change, the item "I directly ask my colleagues for feedback to my work" experienced the highest change overall. The participants frequency in directly asking their colleagues for feedback on their work significantly increased from the pre-test (*Mdn*= 3) to the post-test (*Mdn*= 4), $z = -4.096$, $p < .001$ (*1-tailed*), $r = -.36$. An effect size of $r = -.36$ according to Cohen represents a medium change.

From the other six items that encountered a significant improvement in the frequency of the participants conducting the referenced activities, four of them display small to medium sized changes because their effect sizes fall between Cohen's criteria of $r = .1$ and $r = .3$ for a small and medium effect, respectively: These items are:

- "I actively seek opportunities to improve my work practices": pre-test (*Mdn*= 4), post-test (*Mdn*= 4), $z = -3.132$, $p = .001$ (*1-tailed*), $r = -.28$
- "I discuss with my colleagues possible solutions to work-related challenges": pre-test (*Mdn*= 4), post-test (*Mdn*= 4), $z = -2.640$, $p = .005$ (*1-tailed*), $r = -.24$
- "I learn from thinking about past activities": pre-test (*Mdn*= 4) to the post-test (*Mdn*= 4), $z = -2.734$, $p = .003$ (*1-tailed*), $r = -.24$

- "I adopt changes to work practices when need arises": pre-test (*Mdn*= 4), post-test (*Mdn*= 4), *z* = -2.745, *p* = .003 (*1-tailed*), *r* = -.24.

The other two items display only small changes:

- "I actively deal with my feelings in work situations": pre-test (*Mdn*= 4), post-test (*Mdn*= 4), *z* = -1.854, *p* = .038 (*1-tailed*), *r* = -.17
- "I help colleagues in times of difficulties by asking them questions that support them in finding their own solution": pre-test (*Mdn*= 3), post-test (*Mdn*= 4), *z* = -1.822, *p* = .037 (*1-tailed*), *r* = -.16

Figure 3: Changes in frequency of activities supporting professional identity transformation (n= 63; from 1 "not at all" to 5 "almost daily")
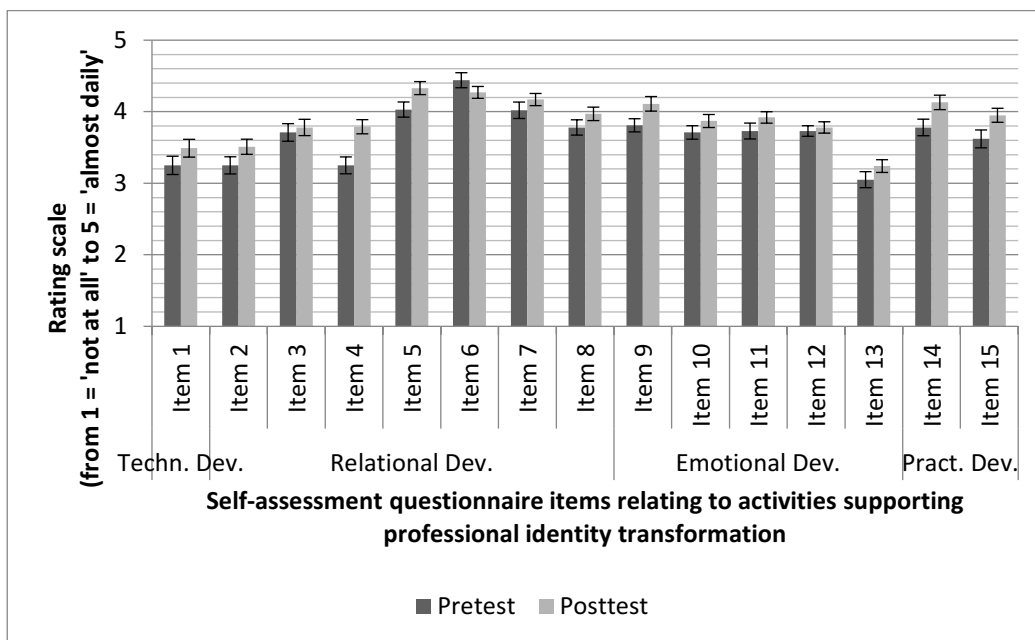
The only item that shows a statistically significant negative change from the pre-test to the post-test is the item "I actively listen to colleagues and clients". Nevertheless, this change is only small according to Cohen's criteria. The participants indicate that they listened to colleagues and clients statistically more actively before the intervention (*Mdn*= 4 and *M*= 4.44) than afterwards (*Mdn*= 4 and *M*= 4.27), *z* = -1.915, *p* = .040 (*1-tailed*), *r* = -.17.

Motivation and confidence to apply the peer coaching knowledge

The course evaluation contained seven open-ended and four closed questions. The values of the closed items could be found in the middle range of "neither agree nor disagree" but very slightly tending towards the direction of "agree" on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". The statement "I am motivated to participate in a peer coaching group with my colleagues" had the highest mean with *M*= 3.71. This was followed by the statements of "I feel confident of participating in a peer coaching group with my colleagues" (M= 3.56) and "I feel confident to apply the knowledge gained from the online course in their daily work" (M= 3.54). The lowest mean of 3.34 is attributed to the statement "I feel confident of creating a peer coaching group with my colleagues". Deeper insights came from the content analysis of responses to the open questions.

Most relevant knowledge from the course

Being asked about the most relevant content from the course in the form of a free text entry field, nearly half of the 68 respondents mentioned the knowledge of powerful questioning as being most relevant for them (n= 27: 39.7%), often together with the notion of helping others to reach a solution without offering one (n= 6: 8.8%) and staying constructive and positive (n= 6: 8.8%). Another highly relevant course content for participants was related to the concept of peer coaching (n= 20: 29.4%), the structure and different steps it takes to lead others into finding solutions. The practical guidelines on how to implement this theoretical knowledge in practice were mentioned in this regard. The latter is also confirmed by the results of the quantitative analysis. The item "I know the procedures of peer coaching" was also part of the pre- and post-test comparison and experienced a significant increase in approval from the pre-test (Mdn= 2) to the post-test (Mdn= 4), z = -6.284, p < .001 (1-tailed), r = -.56. An effect size of r = .56 represents a large effect according to Cohen.

Active listening (n= 8: 11.7%), the concept of emotional awareness (n= 5: 7.4%) and growth mindset awareness (n= 4: 5.9%) were also mentioned as being relevant course content in the free text field. In addition to these concrete skills, respondents also stated that the understanding of how important collaboration (n= 5:7.4%) with others could be, as being a highly relevant learning from the course.

Additional skill requirements

In the attempt to better understand the further training needs of the participants, all 68 participants were asked which skills they would need to become more engaged with peer coaching via a free text field. Looking at the response pattern, it becomes clear that many of the respondents referred to the same knowledge and skill that was already mentioned as being the most relevant knowledge from the course. From the 68 respondents, 26 (38.2%) mentioned "powerful questions" and 21 (30.8%) "active listening". Other aspects mentioned were, "emotional awareness" (n= 7: 10.2%), providing feedback and the transfer of the coaching process into practice or the experience with peer coaching. Seven respondents (10.2%) referred to "time management" as only a good time management would allow them to get involved in peer coaching.

Further comments from the participants

The last open question that asked for further comments as free text provided a rich general feedback from the participants. Participants referred in their final statement to the usefulness and applicability of the course content (n= 13: 19.1%), expressed the fact that the topic was interesting (n= 8: 11.8%), and that there was good material (n= 5: 7.4%). Participants stated the positive experience as such (n= 6: 8.8%), three participants said that is was an "excellent course" (4.4%). Four participants (5.9%) said that other CES employees should participate in this course as well and three (4.4%) referred to the usefulness of the discussions and shared comments in the online platform. Eight respondents (11.8%) shared their positive experience with this new form of social online learning. The fact that it is adaptable to one's own pace, and allows determining one's own work dynamic and participation, depending on other obligations at work place made it a positive experience.

Six participants (8.8%) said that more face-to-face elements are needed especially for practical exercises. Furthermore there was also an indication that more practical work, assignments and examples that show real problem solving are necessary.

Time was an issue freely mentioned by 5 respondents (7.4%). Critical feedback was expressed about the structure of the course website, as for some participants there were too many places to leave comments and too many subpages (n=10, 14.7%).

Discussion

In this article the main focus of research is on the impact of the peer coaching training on those factors that support learning for professional identity transformation and facilitation. In addition, the investigation strives to answer the extent to which the course could increase the participants' peer coaching skills, as well as the confidence and motivation to apply these skills in the practical work context. Thus it tries to fill the gap between transfer of training into practice and what is necessary to lead participants into practice.

The EmployID peer coaching training was conducted from May till end of June 2016 in the Croatian Employment Service (CES). It aimed to train CES practitioners in the methods of peer coaching, as an instrument to strengthen their skills in facilitating solution-finding at the workplace with their colleagues and to enrich their support of clients by approaches like powerful questioning, active listening and mind growth. By encouraging discussions and reflection on specific content of peer coaching within the online course, the research group intended to stimulate mutual exchange and learning among the participants. Even though some exchange was expected, the extent to which the participants responded was surprisingly positive with more than 1,000 comments enriching discussions on the topics of peer coaching within the online course. The outcome of the evaluation was positive, verifying the appropriateness of the intervention in improving the practitioners' skills and knowledge related to peer coaching.

The analysis of the participants' behaviour after the intervention showed that they were more frequently involved in all but one activity related to identity transformation at the end of the course than at the beginning. Changes have been especially sizable and statistically significant for five items: two of these items are related to activities that support the practical development at the workplace: "I actively seek opportunities to improve working practices" (p-value=.002) and "I adopt changes to work practices when the need arises" (p-value= .006); two items covered the relational development and learning from and with peers: "I directly ask colleagues for feedback to my work" (p-value= .000) and "I discuss with my colleagues possible solutions to work-related challenges" (p-value= .008); and one item was related to one's own reflectiveness as an important personal characteristic for successful identity transformation processes: "I learn from thinking about past activities" (p-value= .006).

These results allow for the deduction that the social learning within the peer coaching course has already had an impact on collaborative learning as well as the reflective adaptation and improvement of participants' own work practices.

Interestingly the frequency of the item "I actively listen to clients and colleagues" – a key skill of peer coaching - is the only item whose frequency decreased from the beginning to the end of the course. This phenomenon is regularly observed in learning evaluations that compare data between the start and the end of a training: Through a course, people can better understand specific concepts and can better reflect on their own practices, in this case that 'active listening' implies more than 'just listening'. With this new insight, participants rate their behaviour differently than before and become aware that they do not apply it as often as they thought they did before the course. Another possible explanation of this result is increased self-reflection. Maybe through the course the participants were able to better reflect on their practices; as a result, and at a glance, this looks like a negative result, however it is actually a positive result because their skills in self-reflection increased. The explanation for the negative result is regression to the mean. In general in within-group designs with multiple measurements, extreme scores in the first measurement (either very high or very low) are likely to be followed by lower scores closer to the true mean, on subsequent measurements; by chance regardless of the treatment (Field & Hole, 2003). This is confirmed by the scores on the pre-test where 49.2% of the participants had already rated this item with the maximum value of "very often". This was only true for 36.5% of the participants at the post-test. 33 participants had the same score in the pre-test and the post-test, whereas 20 participants

score on the post-test was lower than in the pre-test and 10 participants' scores improved from the pre-test to the post-test. This phenomenon was not visible in the other items that showed statistically significant differences from the pre-test to the post-test. Other than regression to the mean, there are a number of other conceivable arguments that could, in general, affect the responses of participants in self-report questionnaires. These include, among others, for example: common method variance or common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Lee, 2003), social desirability (Phillips & Clancy, 1972), familiarity with the testing situation (Kirk, 2013) and cognitive dissonance (Colosi & Dunifon, 2006).

The pre-post comparison also showed that participants significantly increased their knowledge about peer coaching processes, and thus improved their technical facilitation skills. The item "I know the procedures of peer coaching" has a significant positive change (p< .001) with a difference 1.58 points on the Likert scale between the pre-test and the post-test.

The questions about the learning outcomes from the peer coaching intervention directly after the course showed that a large majority of participants agreed with statements related to their confidence in applying the knowledge from the course, their motivation and confidence to get involved in peer coaching groups as well as creating peer coaching groups. Participants stated that they intended to use peer coaching with their colleagues and clients and also in personal contexts, where the skills of "powerful questioning" and "active listening" were perceived as especially relevant and important.

A group of around 20% of the 68 questionnaire respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements related to confidence and motivation to use peer coaching. This allows us to deduce that these participants had not formed their opinion about the personal applicability of peer coaching in the working context yet.

Qualitative feedback from the questionnaires reflected a positive experience with the peer coaching course. In their final statements of the questionnaire a large number of participants referred to the usefulness and applicability of the course content, highlighted the interesting topic and good material. Participants expressed a positive learning experience and some suggested that other CES employees should participate in this course as well. The discussions and comments shared with other learners were perceived as useful and an enrichment to the learning experience. The respondents also shared their positive experience with this new form of online learning.

The Croatian Public Employment Service organised the peer coaching course with the aim to equip their employees with new skills, and upgrade the existing ones, to increase resilience and facilitate problem solving in the workplace. The answers to the open question about the application of the knowledge shows that learners wanted to use the newly gained knowledge to help others to reach a solution without offering one themselves, and to stay constructive and positive when working with others.

The necessity of including more face-to-face elements to the training emerged. Some participants suggested complementing the online training with a couple of classroom training sessions for the practical exercises. There were learners who asked for more practical work with other practitioners, more assignments and more examples from practice. Learners also suggested some actions that could help the organisation to incorporate peer coaching knowledge into everyday work procedures. For example, if peer coaching can strengthen peer support, then it needs to be integrated into existing working processes, seen as a priority by the management and therefore supported with time and space.

A planned side effect of the peer coaching training was that the skills they developed as part of the course, for example active listening, emotional awareness and powerful questioning, were not only useful for the facilitation of colleagues, but also for practitioners' work with clients; this was

confirmed by participants of the peer coaching training through an evaluation 4 months after the course (EmployID Consortium, 2017).

Evidence from the project suggests that the learning outcome of such training is not just the knowledge gained on the thematic of peer coaching, but that this process leads to stronger exchange and facilitation among practitioners from the start of the programme, even before the peer coaching groups take place. Another main result is that core skills of peer coaching have been adapted in daily work with clients and colleagues.

Conclusion

In this study it is apparent that the outcome was not just newly acquired knowledge on peer coaching, but also a stronger exchange and facilitation among practitioners. In addition evidence shows that the core skills of peer coaching have already been adapted in the participants' daily work with their clients as well as in facilitating colleagues. The peer coach training and peer coach practice provided the opportunity and freedom to exercise skills that are becoming more and more important in the everyday work of PES practitioners. Improved coaching skills that focus on helping the clients to find their own solution instead of providing advice are more widely requested for in European PES; and thus peer coaching training also has the potential to indirectly affect unemployed people, who are the main clients of PES.

The peer coaching training, as well as peer coaching sessions between colleagues, can be used as a kind of 'playground' in which to experiment and to improve coaching skills that are useful for the participants and their work. What still needs to be fostered for further uptake of the newly gained skills is the ability for PES practitioners to have the time, space and continuous training to enable peer coaching as a way to support professional identity transformation.

A limitation of the research design is that there is no control group in order to establish cause and effect i.e. to clearly determine that the changes in the participants are as a direct consequence of the peer coaching training. Furthermore, the research design does not allow measurement of the appropriate amount of training to yield the intended results. In addition, as the post questionnaire was only administered immediately after the end of the course, it is not possible to see medium and long-term impacts of the intervention. More complex quantitative analysis would be difficult in this case since peer coaching groups are usually made up of about 8 participants, a sample size quite small, for more complex statistical analyses.

Nevertheless this article goes some way to demonstrate what important role training can play in peer support and the facilitation of colleagues by providing evidence from the evaluation of the EmployID intervention in the CES.   The training included a launch workshop and an online course, and featured a self-assessment questionnaire on identity transformation and facilitation. The results also show the importance of gaining knowledge on process, as well as on the skills and practice of peer coaching. Also highlighted are some of the necessary conditions required to encourage participants to practice peer coaching and how peer coaching can help to 'fill the gap' between learning something in theory and then transferring the learning into the workplace.

Acknowledgement

References

Ajdukovic, M., Cajvert, L., Judy, M., Knopf, W., Kuhn, H., Madai, K. & Voogd, M. (2015). ECVision. A European Glossary of Supervision and Coaching. In: M. Judy & W. Knopf (Ed.). *ECVision. Supervision and Coaching in Europe: Concepts and Competences.* Wien: Die Wiener Volkshochschule. Retrieved from http://www.anse.at/ecvision/products.html

Berg, A.M. (2006). Transforming public services – transforming the public servant? *International Journal of Public Sector Management,* 19(6), 556–568.

Berg, T. E. & Berninger-Schaefer, E. (2010). *Die Kollegiale Coaching Konferenz*, Stuttgart: Richard Boorberg Verlag.

Berninger-Schaefer, E. (2011). *Orientierung im Coaching,* Stuttgart: Richard Boorberg Verlag.

Berninger-Schaefer, E. (2012). Die Virtuelle Kollegiale Coaching Konferenz®. In: H. Geissler & M. Metz (Ed.), *E-Coaching und Online-Beratung. Formate, Konzepte, Diskussionen* (pp. 247-260). Wiesbaden: Springer.

Bimrose, J., Brown, A., Holocher-Ertl, T., Kieslinger, B., Kunzmann, C., Prilla, M., Schmidt, A. P. & Wolf, C. (2014). The Role of Facilitation in Technology-Enhanced Learning for Public Employment Services. *International Journal of Advanced Corporate Learning (iJAC)*, 7(3). DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.3991/ijac.v7i3.4050

Boud, D. & Middleton, H. (2003). Learning from others at work: Communities of practice and informal learning. *Journal of Workplace Learning,* 15(5), 194-202.

Brown, A., & Bimrose, B. (2014). Model of learning for career and labour market transitions. *Research in Comparative and International Education,* 9(3), 270-286.

Cavanagh, M. & Grant, A. (2014). The Solution-focused Approach to Coaching. In E. Cox, T. Bachkirova & D. Clutterbuck (Ed.), *The Complete Handbook of Coaching. Second Edition* (pp. 51-64). London: SAGE Publications.

Colosi, L. & Dunifon, R., 2006. What's the Difference? "Post then Pre" & "Pre then Post". [Online] Available at: http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/parents/upload/What-s-20the-20Difference-20Post-20then-20Pre-20and-20Pre-20then-20Post.pdf [Accessed 30 August 2016]

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Supervision e.V. (DGSv) (ed.) (2012). *Fachinformation. Beratung zwischen Foerdern und Fordern. Supervision und Coaching im Jobcenter.* Kassel: Kassel University Press.

EmployID Consortium. (2017). Empowering change in public employment services. Part II. [Online] Available at: http://employid.eu [Accessed 30 August 2017]

Field, A. (2013). *Discovering statistics using IBM SPSS statistics,* London: SAGE Publications.

Field, A. & Hole, G. (2003). *How to Design and Report Experiments,* Wiltshire: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Heinz, W. R. (2010). Vocational Identity and Flexible Work : A Contradicting or Constructive Relation ? In F. Rauner (Ed.), *Innovative apprenticeships: Promoting successful school-to-work transitions* (pp. 35–47). LIT Verlag Muenster.

Hooker, T. (2014). The benefits of peer coaching as a support system for early childhood education students. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring,* 12 (1), 109-122.

Huston, T. & Weaver, C. L. (2008). Peer Coaching: Professional development for Experienced Faculty. *Innovative Higher Education,* 3 (3), 5-20.

Kirk, R. E., 2013. Experimental Design. In: S. Publishers, ed. Experimental Design: Procedures for the Behavioral Sciences. s.l.:s.n., pp. 23-45.

Kirpal, S. R. (2011). *Labour-market flexibility and individual careers: a comparative study*. (R. Maclean, Ed.). Springer.

Ladyshewsky, R. K. (2014). Peer Coaching. In E. Cox, T. Bachkirova & D. Clutterbuck (Ed.), *The Complete Handbook of Coaching. Second Edition* (pp. 285-296). London: SAGE Publications.

Ladyshewsky, R.K. (2016). Peer coaching as a strategy to increase learning and development in organisational life – a perspective. *International Journal for Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 15(1), 4-10

Lippmann, E. D. (2013). *Intervision. Kollegiales Coaching professionell gestalten,* Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer.

Manahl, C. & Tschank, J. (2016). Necessary prerequisites at the organisational level for (re)engaging disadvantaged learners in education. Retrieved 30th January 2017 from https://www.zsi.at/de/object/publication/4172

Mayring, P. (2000). Qualitative Content Analysis. Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 1(2). Retrieved 30th January 2017 from http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0002204

Mueller, M. (2013). "Erfahrungen mit Supervision und Coaching in Jobcentern". Bericht zur *Forschungsstudie.* University of Applied Labour Sciences, Mannheim. Retrieved 23rd November 2016 from http://www.dgsv.de/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/mueller_endbericht_supervision_in_jobcentern.pdf

Pabst, J. (2016). Der Kollege weiß, wie's laeuft. *Human Resource Manager*, p. 59.

PES (Public Employment Services) (2012). Public Employment Services' Contribution to EU 2020. PES 2020 Strategy Output Paper. Retrieved 31st January 2017 from http://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=9690&langId=en

Phillips, D. L. & Clancy, K. J. (1972). Some Effects of 'Social Desirability' in Survey Studies. American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 77, N0. 5, March, pp. 921-940.

Podsakoff, P.M.; MacKenzie, S.B.; Lee, J.-Y.; Podsakoff, N.P. (2003). "Common method biases in behavioral research: A critical review of the literature and recommended remedies". Journal of Applied Psychology. 88 (5): 879–903. Retrieved 3rd August 2017 from http://www.personal.psu.edu/jxb14/M554/articles/Podsakoffetal2003.pdf

Schmidt, A. P. & Kunzmann, C. (2016) (Ed.), *Empowering Change in Public Employment Services: The EmployID Approach* (pp. 23-25). Retrieved from http://employid.eu/sites/default/files/Deliverable_Y2_Public_Final.pdf

Shadish, W., Cook, T., & Campbell, D. (2002).*Experimental and quasi-experimental designs for generalized causal inference*. Unites States of America: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.

Sparks, G. M. & Bruder, S. (1987). Before and After Peer Coaching. *Educational Leadership,* Vol. 45, No. 3, pp. 54-57.

Wolf, C. & Gidion, G. (2016). Europaweit vernetztes Problemloesen in den oeffentlichen Arbeitsverwaltungen mit Kollegialem Coaching Tool. In: GfA (Hrsg.), *Arbeit in komplexen* Systemen. Digital, vernetzt, human?! – C 8.15 (p. 1-6.). GfA: Dortmund.

Wolf, C. & Gidion, G. (2017). Facilitation of mutual learning through technology-enhanced peer coaching. L. Gómez Chova, A. López Martínez, I. Candel Torres (Ed.) *INTED2017 Proceedings 11th International Technology, Education and Development Conference March 6th-8th, 2017 (*pp. 5479-5485) *Valencia, Spain. IATED.*

Author information

Carmen Wolf is academic staff in vocational and general education at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, doctoral candidate, certified Business Coach and CAI®-certified Online-Coach.

Teresa Schaefer studied Economics at the University of Vienna. Her fields of work are user-centred design and evaluation of socio-technical innovations in communication and learning.

Katarina Ćurković studied Psychology at University of Zagreb and is working in Croatian Employment Service. She also study cognitive behavioural therapies, organised by CABCT.

Tanja Vlahović studied Psychology at the Centre of Croatian Studies, University of Zagreb. Her fields of work include various project proposals preparation and their implementation.

Angela Rees is a trainer and researcher in education. She specializes in e-learning for CPD and open badges.

Juliet Tschank is researcher and project manager at the Centre for Social Innovation, Vienna. Research foci: migration and social inclusion. Methodological proficiency: quantitative and qualitative.