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Training of Transversal Competences Involved in Success in Career

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Abstract

The paper presents the results of a research study that aimed to validate a transversal competences training program, which applies techniques specific to humanistic psychotherapies. The first two steps were to develop an Assessment Scale with Behavioral Anchors for evaluating the technical and contextual performance and a competence-profile the graduated young person needs in order to attain success in career, in the context of Romanian organizational environment. The research sample included a number of 120 young adults with no basic qualification, aged between 18 and 20. We used three measures: California Personality Inventory (6 scales: sociability, responsibility, communality, achievement via independence, intellectual efficiency, and flexibility), Revised NEO Personality Inventory, and Assessment Scale with Behavioral Anchors. The transversal competences training program for young adults with no basic qualification targets the personal development of the individual, its personal growing, by adapting its life philosophy to the requests of the organizational environment; these achievements have the quality of motivating the young adult to go back to school and achieve a professional qualification.

1. Introduction

On the basis of studies emphasizing the distinction between technical performance and contextual performance, the study goes beyond the boundaries of traditional models in vocational counselling or organizational psychology and outlines a research direction that focuses on optimizing and developing competencies involved in success in career using techniques derived from humanistic psychotherapies. Regarding the competences, literature-review about psychological and social competencies suggest that the category of psychological competencies includes both cognitive elements (academic intelligence level, the characteristics of the knowledge base, information-processing mechanisms and so on) and affective ones (emotional stability, empathy, stress tolerance, an optimal self-image and

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so on). As for the social competencies, we name: the capacity to assert oneself, verbal and nonverbal communication abilities, empathy, and self-presentation and so on. The affective elements can be included in the concept of emotional intelligence, that's why we can assert that training someone's psychological and social competencies means to develop his/her emotional intelligence (with regard to both intrapersonal and interpersonal aspects) and implicitly the optimization of his/her cognitive structure (regarding both content and knowledge organization manner). Acquisitions in the sphere of emotional intelligence are susceptible of facilitating acquiring contextual performances, whereas cognitive acquisitions will contribute to attaining technical performances, although the distinction is purely theoretical. In the context of a solid professional knowledge-base, such an approach is susceptible of generating an adapted and efficient behaviour. In the context of the rapid changes an organization must go through nowadays, a high level of emotional intelligence has become an important factor for success, sometimes even more important than the professional technical competence. Godek and Murray (2008), confirmed by means of two experiments that, when people are oriented to the future, they tend to use rational processing, and when they turn to the past, they tend to use experiential processing. The starting point was the adaptation they made to the Epstein's (1991) characteristics for both types of processing. They described the experiential system as holistic, automatic, affective, more rapid, and action oriented, encoding reality in concrete images, metaphors and narratives. On the other side, rational processing is analytic, intentional, logical, but also slower, encoding reality in abstract symbols, words and numbers, generating behaviour mediated by conscious appraisal of events. They didn't, though, elucidated the mechanisms that link the time orientation to a certain processing type, experiential or rational. They mentioned the hypothesis from a previous study, conducted by Schul and Mayo (2003), who believed that the future orientation determines self- detachment. Marks, Hine, Blore and Philips (2007) came with an instrument to assess the dominant processing type, showing that rational scores were associated with openness to experience, conscientiousness and open minded thinking, and experientialism correlated positively with emotional expressivity in adolescents with ages between 13.1 and 18.8 years. Previously, Pacini and Epstein (1999) found that experiential processing was associated with conscientiousness and openness to experience on an adult sample. Experiential learning helps students focus on the personal way of solving specific tasks over and over again so that they learn how to stimulate growth in others, and also they benefit from the experience themselves. Mergenthaler (2008), starting from the interactions between client and psychotherapist, proposed a dynamic in four steps clients use when faced with a problematic situation: relaxation, experience, connection, and reflection, in what he called the theory of "resonating minds". A person goes through the whole cycle to solve a life problem in a different period of time, from minutes to months. The stages are differentiated according to the level of emotion and abstraction: relaxation is characterized by lower emotional and abstraction levels; experience by a higher emotional level, either positive or negative, and still a lower abstraction level; connection implies a lot of emotion and higher abstraction; and, finally, reflection comes with low emotional level and high abstraction. Mergenthaler's model transcends the dichotomy between rational and emotional processing, showing that it is their interplay that characterizes human development, with emotions guiding the appropriate cognitive processing: negative emotions allow recalling autobiographic material deepening processing in the present, and positive emotions stimulate insight. Experiential learning is based on the synergistic effects emerging from interactions between five polarities: apprehension and comprehension, reflection and action, epistemological discourse and ontological recourse, individuality and rationality, status and solidarity. A particular form of experiential learning, conversational learning, is efficient in training managers. It was defined as "a process whereby learners construct new meaning and transform their collective experiences into knowledge through their conversation" (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2005, p.412), while experiential learning is creating knowledge through transformation of experience. Using perceptions and theoretical knowledge alone is not as helpful as combining them with internal reflection upon them in a process of extending them and self-knowledge (Kolb, 1984). Taking these ideas as a starting point, the project launches a new direction of research; this direction capitalizes the results of two distinct approaches in contemporary psychology (Organizational Psychology and Psychotherapy) and applies techniques specific to humanistic therapies in areas specific to Organizational Psychology and Human Resources Management. Thus, the research goes beyond the theoretical approaches and lecture-like training programs that aim especially at the surface level of success in career and targets the personal development of the individual, it's personal growing, adapting its life philosophy to the requests of the organizational environment specific to a society in transition.

2. Research methodology

2.1. Objectives

The present research is meant to highlight the following aspects: a) develop an Assessment Scale with Behavioral Anchors for evaluating the technical and contextual performance, adapted to Romanian organizational environment; b) develop a competence-profile the graduated young person needs in order to attain success in career, in the context of Romanian organizational environment; c) develop and validate a transversal competences training program for young adults with no basic qualification. The first hypothesis was that the main transversal competences that a young adult needs in order to achieve professional success in his/her future career are related to emotional intelligence, critical thinking, communication skills, personal efficiency, team working skills, managerial abilities, assertive attitude, conflict solving skills, ability to cope with stress, and self-assessment ability. The second hypothesis was that the program proposed will be efficient in enhancing these competences in the young adults with no basic qualification and will help them find their career path.

2.2. Description of research sample

For the validation of the transversal competences training program for young adults with no basic qualification, the *research sample* consisted, of a number of 120 young adults, aged between 18 and 20, all high school graduates without baccalaureate degree. For the validation of the Assessment Scale with Behavioral Anchors for evaluating the technical and contextual performance we used a sample of 450 university graduates, aged between 25 and 35, selected by the stratified sampling procedure, following three selection criteria: professional field (15 fields – education, health, economics, industry, military, theology, services, politics, culture, social, agriculture, sport, administration, juridical and mass-media - 30 subjects from each), level of success in career (high, medium and low) and gender (225 males and 225 females).

2.3. Methods

For developing the Assessment Scale with Behavioral Anchors for evaluating the technical and contextual performance we have used the experts' model, in four steps. First, ten experts were asked to formulate a set of dimensions (factors and competences) that form the bases of the success in career; then the group discussed all the resulting dimensions, eliminated the redundant ones and elaborated definitions for the remaining 11 dimensions of the success in career. Second, another group of 35 experts received the list of dimensions and their definitions and were asked to make behavioural descriptions (on the level of professional performance) for each; the results were analysed and were retained only the descriptions that had a frequency higher than 60%, 94 behavioural descriptions. Third, another group of 30 experts made the retroversion procedure: they received a list with the dimensions and another with the behavioural descriptions and had to allow each behaviour description to the corresponding dimension; only the behavioural descriptions that had a correspondence higher than 67% were retained. Forth, another group of 30 experts was asked to evaluate every item of the instrument on a 5 points scale. For each item the mean and the standard deviation was computed, and there were selected only the items that had the lowest standard deviation, meaning a reduced inter-ratters variability. The final scale had 7 dimensions and 77 behavioural descriptions. The 7 dimensions of the success in career were: communication skills, team working skills, managerial abilities, ethical behaviour, academic and emotional intelligence, professional training and technical performance. For developing a competence-profile the graduated young person needs in order to attain success in career, in the context of Romanian organizational environment the *psychometric method* was used. We used three measures: California Personality Inventory – CPI (6 scales: sociability, responsibility, communality, achievement via independence, intellectual efficiency, and flexibility), NEO Personality Inventory Revised NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1991), and Assessment Scale with Behavioral Anchors. We have tested the sample of 450 university graduates, aged between 25 and 35. For the development and validation of a transversal competences training program for young adults with no basic qualification we used a pre-post-test experimental design. The subjects were 120 young adults, aged between 18 and 20, all high school graduates without baccalaureate degree, who were randomized allocated to the experimental and the control group. They were tested with the CPI Inventory and the

NEO-PI-R Inventory before and after the program implementation. The transversal competences training program consisted in 40 hours group sessions of personal development exercises, using techniques derived from humanistic psychotherapies. The 60 subjects of the experimental group were divided in 5 groups of 12 peoples. The sessions were 4 hours long, each group of 12 peoples benefiting from 10 sessions, and every session was conducted by two trainers, both attested experiential psychotherapists.

2.4 Research results

For the validation of the Assessment Scale with Behavioral Anchors, managers from 15 professionals' fields were asked to rate with this instrument 450 young university graduates employees. The reliability of the seven dimensions of the scale was determined by the internal consistency coefficient Alpha Crombach, and the values were between n=0.58 and n=0.89. The correlation coefficients between the 7 dimensions of the instrument were highly significant; the matrix of inter-items correlations had high values, concluding a very good internal consistency of the instrument. For the developing of a competence-profile the graduated young person needs in order to attain success in career, the correlations between the dimensions of the Assessment Scale with Behavioral Anchors and the scales of CPI and NEO-PI-R were computed, using SPSS 13 program. The last two dimensions of the scale, professional training and technical performance, were not taken into consideration, because they develop by academic learning, not by personal development. The values of the Pearson's coefficients show high significant positive correlations ($p<0.01$) between the dimension communication skills and the NEO-PI-R scales E3 (Assertiveness, r=0.235), O5 (Ideas, r=0.242), C1 (Competence, r=0.219), C2 (Order, r=0.222), C4 (Achievement striving, r=0.204) and C6 (Deliberation, r=0.217). Moderate significant positive correlations ($p<0.05$) were obtained between: the dimension managerial abilities and the NEO-PI-R scales E3 (Assertiveness, r=0.187), O5 (Ideas, r=0.174) and C2 (Order, r=0.182); the dimension academic and emotional intelligence and the NEO-PI-R scales A1 (Trust, r=0.198) and A6 (Tender-Mindedness, r=0.170); the dimension communication skills and the NEO-PI-R scales A5 (Modesty, r=0.157), C3 (Dutifulness, r=0.191) and C5 (Self-Discipline, r=0.182); the dimensions team working skills (r=0.159) and ethical behaviour (r=0.182) and the NEO-PI-R scale C6 (Deliberation). High significant negative correlations ($p<0.01$) was obtained between: the dimension academic and emotional intelligence and the CPI scale Ai (Achievement via Independence, r=-0.214). Moderate significant negative correlations ($p<0.05$) were obtained between: the dimensions communication skills (r=-0.171), team working skills (r=-0.172), managerial abilities (r=-0.192) and ethical behaviour (r=-0.191) and the CPI scale Ai (Achievement via Independence); the dimension ethical behaviour and the CPI scale Re (Responsibility, r=-0.155). For the development and validation of a transversal competences training program for young adults with no basic qualification, paired samples Student's *t*-test was used to determine if there were significant differences between the initial and final assessments for CPI Inventory and the NEO-PI-R Inventory scales. Significant pre-post-test improvements were found for the scales E3 (Assertiveness, t=-19.61, p=0.000), O5(Ideas, t=-18.03, p=0.000), A1 (Trust, t=-19.48, p=0.000), A5 (Modesty, t=-24.97, p=0.000), A6 (Tender-Mindedness, t=-21.30, p=0.000), C1 (Competence, t=-21.42, p=0.000), C2 (Order, t=-16.80, p=0.000), C3 (Dutifulness, t=-14.14, p=0.000), C5 (Self-Discipline, t=-25.79, p=0.000), C6 (Deliberation, t=-15.11, p=0.000).

3. Discussions

Based on statistical analysis of the results obtained from the application of the three instruments in subjects investigated, the most valued skills in Romanian organizational environments seem related to communication skills, team working skills, managerial abilities, and ethical behaviour, academic and emotional intelligence. These skills are associated at the personality system level with a number of features related to the degree of affirmation, openness to ideas, conscientiousness, self-esteem and the capacity to establish good relationships with others. Success in career seems rather favored by the development of the interpersonal dimension of personality, manifested by a behavior oriented to personal and professional oriented affirmation, slightly dominant, with force and social ascendancy but cooperative rather than competitive, sympathetic and with the tendency to help others. Another important dimension for career development in any field is openness to ideas or intellectual curiosity, dimension involving expressions of interest for new ideas, for unconventional and original aspects. Otherwise characteristic for this stage of age, openness to ideas favors an optimal degree of flexibility and adaptability of thinking to the possible

career changes. Also, another common factor for career success is the self-conscientiousness. Self-consciousness refers to the ability of self-organization in terms of planning and achieving goals. Competence, efficiency, self-confidence, ability to be organized, planned, systematic, responsible, with strong ethical principles, diligence are significant personality characteristics that support career success in Romania, associated with competence in communication and the ability to establish optimal relationships with others, with leadership skills and emotional intelligence. The training program aimed to develop transversal competences for young adults with no basic qualification proved significant improvements for 10 personality characteristics: assertiveness, openness to ideas, trust, modesty, tender-mindedness, self-competence, order, dutifulness, self-discipline, and deliberation.

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