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Training people with mental illness and learning disabilities for employment - cooking and role-playing techniques

For many people with mental illness and learning disabilities, working and gaining professional fulfilment is only a dream. Apart from the usual problems with finding a job, they face additional barriers: they often lack social skills necessary to work in a team.

A methodology of experiential learning has been developed during the three years SUVOT project, co-funded by the European Commission, Life-long Learning Programme, Leonardo da Vinci subprogramme. A one year vocational course in cooking has been designed taking into account the special needs of the trainees. Apart from cooking sessions planned twice a week, once a week participants attend simulation methodology training – role-playing and theatre exercises helping them to acquire personal and social skills needed at work.

For many people with disabilities working and gaining professional fulfilment is only a dream, as apart from the usual problems with finding a job, they face additional barriers: not only physical and technical, but most often social. People with mental and cognitive disabilities are most affected by prejudices and social stigma – surveys reveal a 3 to 5 times higher unemployment rate amongst individuals with mental illness although the majority of them are able and willing to work. “Nobody is to be discriminated because of his or her disability!” This is one of the central statements anchored in the European legislation and leads to many measures that try to ensure that handicapped people have the same options and choices as non-handicapped people. A big issue is the accessibility to any area of life. People with disabilities have special rights - starting from early intervention up to rehabilitation care at any age. Although there are clear guidelines, and the law is well-intentioned regarding handicapped people, the reality often looks different. People are refused for flimsy reasons and have trouble finding a job, despite their high qualifications. Many don't even try to enter employment, but live on the support of the state, which isn't satisfying. Yet, even if potential employers are open-minded, many people with mental or learning disabilities lack the necessary social skills to get and maintain a job, especially in today's competitive market.

SUVOT – Spicing up Vocational Training

An attempt to break this vicious circle of hopelessness is the European SUVOT project, a 3-year initiative run by the Spanish INTRAS Foundation in co-operation with other charitable organizations: German CJD, Slovenian OZARA and Polish Grodzki Theatre Association. SUVOT project is co-funded by the European Commission (Lifelong Learning Program, Leonardo Da Vinci sub-program). This innovative project, developed during the years 2010-2013, reinforces the rule “Nobody is to be discriminated because of his or her disability!” A methodology of experiential learning has been developed to enable people suffering from mental illness, learning disabilities or/ and behavioural disorders to acquire skills to find and maintain a job. A one year vocational course in cooking has been designed taking into account the special needs of the trainees. The curriculum plan for the contents to be taught was created by the German partner – the vocational training centre CJD Frechen. But why is SUVOT's training so innovative? Apart from cooking sessions planned twice a week, once a week participants attend simulation methodology training – role-playing and theatre exercises helping them to acquire personal and social skills needed at work. The simulation methodology was created by the Polish

partner – Grodzki Theatre Association from Bielsko-Biała. *“Theatre exercises allow one to learn the rules of working in a group”* – explains Maria Schejbal, the author of the new methodology. *“When we take part in theatre exercises, we always play a certain role; we go beyond standard behaviour and habits. Theatre exercises integrate the group, teach participants to concentrate, pay attention and to be precise. At the same time they provide relaxation, calm one’s nerves, give joy and a feeling of detachment from everyday worries.”*

This unusual, attractive training of social skills contains many psychodramatic games and techniques. They help to conquer the fear of new challenges, which can be especially difficult for people recovering from psychological problems who have gone through some traumatic experiences. All of the exercises and games described in SUVOT’s Teaching Manual were based on the extensive experience of Grodzki Theatre Association in conducting workshops for socially excluded groups. All of them were tested during SUVOT pilot workshops in Spain, Germany and Slovenia (May 2012–May 2013) attended by people with mental and learning disabilities. Let us now hear the opinions of the trainers on the idea of combining cooking and psychodrama. *“We often reached points in the cooking training about which the group was very sensitive.”* – explains Odilia Henkys-Liecks, cooking trainer from CJD, Germany. *“It was really good to have the simulation methodology trainer working on exactly this area.”* She underlines the fact that due to additional support the trainees felt comfortable to say what they really felt and became more relaxed and confident. Anja Rozman, the Slovenian trainer points to the therapeutic effect of the sociodrama and theatre exercises which she tested with her group: *“Through these activities the participants learned about their fears, dilemmas and frustrations”*. By acting out different situations, trainees learned how to find new solutions and possibilities for solving problems.

Training in cooking - international recipes

The partner in charge of the cooking part of SUVOT is CJD from Germany. As a vocational training centre the success of CJD is measured

by the number of people getting long-term access to the first labour market after finishing their training. Accordingly CJD looks for new innovative options to equip the trainees in the best way to find access to and remain in the first labour market. Up to now the apprenticeship in the field of housekeeping consisted of professional practical and theoretical competences in the area of cooking, cleaning, service and laundry care. The elements concerning cooking were adapted to the circumstances in the project and included in the SUVOT training course. Forty recipes form the frame of the curriculum. To facilitate learning and make it more attractive, the programme is focused on the practical - each lesson is developed around one recipe. The teaching contents include the different ingredients (nutrition), the handling of ingredients (techniques like cutting, cooking), seasonal references and hygiene in the kitchen. A special aspect of the program is the internationality of the recipes and consequently the teaching aspect of international understanding and openness. Another aspect is the self-sustaining thought of the program. The trainees can learn how to cook for themselves as well as how to cook for different other groups in their social surrounding, to raise acceptance of the trainees in their environment. In the beginning of the course, every trainee receives the trainees’ textbook, which includes the most important contents of the sessions.

The recipes are structured into four categories of difficulty, depending on the variety and complicity of ingredients and the necessary cooking skills. The trainees quarterly enter the next category level. Starting with basic activities such as reading recipes, learning conversion tables (like grams, kilos...) and basic hygiene facts, writing shopping lists and rotating the system of responsibilities, the trainees get into the course. The second to fourth quarter include more challenging topics such as nutrition, seasonal cooking knowledge, internationality and finally customer care, serving and cooking for different groups. All together the training is structured to be easily imitated. Trainees comment on this process in the following way: *“In the beginning it was easy, but when I had to write the shopping list and do the shopping the first time I realized: That’s not going to be*

an easy job! It really became more and more challenging, but most of the times we worked together we were satisfied with the results and it is great fun and we get a great feeling of success!"

Training of soft-skills – role-playing techniques

Based on the results of a study which was conducted by the German Chamber of Industries and Commerce in 2010 we know that besides professionalism, employers unconditionally expect the following soft skills: readiness for action, sense of responsibility, communication skills and team spirit, resilience and motivation. Considering this fact CJD came to the conclusion that vocational training cannot be "just" teaching professional theoretical and practical knowledge and abilities. In modern times it is not enough to be professional to get and retain a job. We must teach our trainees both how to be professional in the working field and how to communicate, cooperate, express and receive criticism in the right way. Since the unemployment rate is growing and employers can choose between often hundreds of applicants, the dual educational system must adapt and include social skills as well! Already in 2008 CJD started to implement an additional module in vocational training which is geared to support social skills. Since then, this module is constantly improved and different contents are tested. Up to now, we have used teambuilding activities and reflection talks, always mindful to look at the trainee in his or her entirety, not just regarding abilities or the state of mind.

Developing a support system which covers all the needs required for the participant to withstand the labour market means a process of trial and error. During the SUVOT project the mixture of role-playing and cooking training was implemented the very first time and we can confirm a result of trial and success! During the pilot training in three countries it was discovered that the trainees learn and work much more efficiently if they have a space exclusively for their personal development. The German cooking trainer verbalized it in the following way: *"It is very obvious that the participants are more balanced once they know that their personal*

needs are being responded to. They have this fixed day of sociodrama and they know that this is the time to bring their personal affairs forward and talk about them. When there are personal problems or interpersonal conflicts, I can just suggest that the trainees discuss them during the simulation methodology session. Sure, sometimes -when there are acute cases, it's not possible to tell the trainees to clarify it in another place, but all the little things that normally disturb the working process have a fixed space now."

One can ask, however, what kind of social skills are most necessary for people with mental illness to enter employment and become a valuable worker. In addition to the results of the study of the German Chamber of Industry and Commerce, we conducted a survey at the beginning of the SUVOT project in Spain, Germany and Slovenia among 101 people suffering from various mental disabilities. The key problem areas for people with mental illness were identified and matched identically with the results of the study concerning the expectations of employers in general. Additionally, the SUVOT study showed that people with mental illness have a special need to establish their self-esteem. The SUVOT training program was constructed to address these professional challenges. Let us, therefore, look at the selected social skills more closely and see how they were developed in practice in our training programme.

Social skills – problematic areas

1. Working in a group

According to the results of the survey, the area of co-operation with colleagues at work is certainly problematic (25% of respondents declared problems in this area). But how can we develop the ability of working in a group through theatrical and psychodramatic exercises?

"Theatre is social art – explains Maria Schejbal. It happens for people and with people.

The Spanish trainer from INTRAS Foundation, Veronica Estrada, noticed very clearly how group games and exercises helped to integrate the trainees during the pilot workshops. *"Each session was more profitable and more relaxed than the last one. Group*

cohesion was growing every day; as was the respect and support that participants showed to one another". "The communication between the participants was increased by the movement games and they enjoyed it very much" - comments the German trainer. Exercises with everyday objects like sticks, balls or balloons were very attractive for participants. All of them jumped to hit the balloon, even some people who normally are not involved in physical activities, forming a good team.

2. Verbal skills and communication

As with problematic group and work-related areas the survey shows there is a necessity to develop the verbal skills of people with mental illness. The number of respondents who never talk about themselves and their skills is very high, almost 19%.

The Spanish trainer, Veronica Estrada shares her experience of running one exercise which really made a difference. *"We used the exercise "I am the only person in the group, who..." It started very slowly, participants questioned if they were able to say certain things. The longer they did the exercise, the more confident they felt. They told us about very private things in a very normal way feeling very comfortable. We really appreciated this positive aspect of the session which reinforced their self-confidence".*

3. Personal motivation

This is a very important area to address as altogether 39% respondents of the survey claimed that they are not motivated to achieve their goals.

One of the exercises recommended in the SUVOT methodology for developing personal motivation is "The knot", which turned out to be one of the favourite activities during the pilot workshops. The participants join hands forming a knot, which must be undone, without anybody letting go of any hand. The more entangled the knot, the greater the involvement of the group and greater satisfaction once it is untangled. Typically when the group manages to undo it and form a circle, the participants express their joy with spontaneous applause. Personal motivation, however, is strongly linked to the next problematic area described below.

4. Goal-oriented approach, concentration, discipline

People with mental disabilities experience difficulties in focusing on one activity for a long period of time and often lack a goal-oriented approach. In the SUVOT Teaching Manual we recommend many exercises and games to develop the above-mentioned skills. One example is the Path technique where participants are asked to lay out, on the floor, colourful scarves along an imaginary path that leads to a desired goal. *"The dynamic "path" was one of the most positive and useful of all the exercises we have done during the SUVOT project - comments Nerea Hernández, a trainer from INTRAS Foundation, Spain. "People suffering from schizophrenia have lack of initiative, and future hopes. It was very positive both for trainers and trainees to see how participants try their best with a lot of effort and finally they succeeded in explaining some of their objectives and even how they could achieve them".*

5. Self-esteem and self-belief

50% of people with mental illness who took part in the survey didn't see themselves as good workers. 45% of respondents considered themselves not able to stand up to people and instead passively follow orders. It is therefore essential to try to change their way of evaluating themselves in terms of their skills and potential. Vocational training certainly helps to increase self-esteem. The trainees of SUVOT's course really enjoyed the dishes they prepared during the cooking lessons. Moreover, they also cooked for other users of the day/training centres and became very proud of their work. However, their self-belief was constantly developed during the weekly theatre/psychodrama sessions designed by Grodzki Theatre Association. Two trainers of the German pilot group remember very clearly the effect of one exercise called "The Organism" when each group member represented one bodily part of a chosen organism. *"One participant, who is VERY introverted sat down in the very middle and said: I am the heart, I am a tiger."*

6. Dealing with difficult (negative) feelings

The last problematic area pointed out by the survey is controlling negative feelings such as sadness, fear and anger. As many as 64% of respondents suffering from mental illnesses

admit that they have problems with containing negative feelings...Taking this into account, many of the simulation methodology exercises offered by the SUVOT course deal with how to cope with negative feelings. Maria Schejbal, the author of the methodology, recommends coming back to some tasks during the course and doing them again to test the progress of the group and each participant. The game called "Fortunately-Unfortunately" is a good example of such an activity. *"The evolution of this exercise in the group was fantastic"* - comments Veronica Estrada, trainer of the Spanish pilot group. *"The first time we did this exercise the feelings and situations were more trivial than this time, where participants expressed deeper feelings. The group tried to motivate and communicate positive aspects when talking about unfortunate situations"*.

Going through all the proposed exercises in the course for one year, week by week, was certainly not easy for the trainers and participants. *"It often happened that it was hard to motivate the participants to start an activity"* - explains Anja Rozman who worked with the Slovenian group. *"But when they started, they cooperated actively. Afterwards they also told me that it was good. I always encouraged them at least to try the activity, because afterwards they felt much better."*

The simulation methodology which forms part of the SUVOT Teaching Manual was reviewed by Barbara Beck, clinical psychologist and Programme Coordinator for the Outpatient Psychiatric Rehabilitation Ward in the Psychiatric Hospital, Bielsko-Biała, Poland. She strongly believes that *"the proposed publication may be a valuable and helpful resource in programmes for preparing disabled people for employment"*. She finishes her review with a personal note. *"I also hope that the presented work as well as the participation of people with mental illnesses in education curricula helps to combat the prejudices and stereotypes associated with mental illness, increases possibilities for employment amongst those affected, and helps in reintegrating disabled people into the workplace"*.

SUVOT's Teaching Manual and Trainees Textbook is published in five languages: English, Spanish, Slovenian, German and Polish. For more information, please visit the website <http://suvot.intras.es>