

## The joys & perils of international working

Last week’s article by David Booth introduced the Travors Project, which is developing skills-based training for employment advisors of disabled people, and also training for the trainers of advisors. As David said, it came about from an enthusiastic conversation in a bar, during which we lamented the difficulty of finding training for vocational and employment advisors that had been tested and shown to be effective in improving their skills. Such was our enthusiasm, that we also discussed whether it could be tested in an international arena. If a course could work in several environments, its value would be proven; and we would learn much from any differences. The prospect of working with colleagues from previous projects, and with new partners in other countries was enticing, if a little challenging! So when the Leonardo da Vinci Programme of the EU opened its bidding, we went to acquaintances from previous projects, and found some new organisations, who were interested in our project. The Programme offered funding for trials, and we hope to feed the results back into our UK training, ‘exporting’ the skills approach to other countries.

Skills are important. It is skill, not knowledge, which enables an advisor to motivate a person with a disability, and to help them cope with the complexities of going to work. The skills of information-finding and of working with organisations enable the advisor to keep their knowledge and resources up to date. Skills can be used anywhere. Skilled people are able to adapt their practice, and this is important for VR practitioners: every case they meet has its own peculiarities. Skills can be taught and used in quite different settings. In contrast, knowledge and experience are very specific to the setting, and do not transfer easily between companies, cultures, legislative environments or commercial sectors.

So a skills approach to training employment advisors and their trainers has much to offer that traditional information-giving cannot. But to be effective, skills have to be learned and practiced using techniques that are adapted to the local needs, be it in a company, in an NGO, or elsewhere. Learning has to result in changed behaviour if the benefits of training are to be had, and I am sure many readers will have had the experience of training sessions and courses that did not have much impact. For employment or vocational rehabilitation advisors, better skills can be the key to more effective work. An opportunity to devise, pilot and evaluate skills training is not to be missed!

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For RNL, the first challenge was develop lists of the key skills and behaviours that can be taught and observed. The result has been a list of about 700 skills (so far) arranged in modules for

- Work focussed interviewing
- Case Management
- Engaging with employers
- Job seeking skills
- Job maintenance
- Generic advisor skills
- Trainer skills

and a set of about 200 documents that provide the teaching resources.

Now we are at the stage where these resources are being developed in each country, for different business sectors – private commercial, NGO, University College – and for use at different scales – a small owner-managed company, a substantial private training company, a government ministry, and specialist e-learning providers.

What can we hope to learn for the UK? We will be able to provide training that has been designed to researched good-practice standards and has been independently evaluated in various settings. We will know much more about what works to make effective training for employment advisors and trainers.

And the joys and perils? Well, some of the perils include the bidding process, the uncertainty, and the bureaucracy that inevitably goes with public programmes. No one makes a profit from the programmes, unless you count, as I do, learning, professional development and enhanced products as profit. Maintaining a co-operative partnership between diverse organisations across five countries can be demanding, but it holds more joy than danger, because of the richness of ideas and approaches it offers. Working across languages is a wonderful experience. Although we use English as the common language of the group, the different languages introduce a strong discipline, demanding that our words are clear, brief and to the point. Grice's maxims are in strong evidence – look them up on Wikipedia if you have not met them yet.

And not least in the benefits of international working, can be counted the chance to make new friends, to discover the recipe for Morcilla with Broad Beans over a working lunch in Madrid, or to enjoy an evening with friends and colleagues by the Baltic. Wonderful, and they call it work!

David Imber

The Travors project's new and under-construction website is on <http://www.idec.gr/travors/index.html> or contact [david@vocationalrehabilitationconsultants.com](mailto:david@vocationalrehabilitationconsultants.com)

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