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**EUROPEAN TRENDS IN THE USE OF ICT IN DELIVERING
COUNSELLING SERVICES**

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Abstract: *Career counselling services have benefited considerably from the advent of new technologies, but it seems that for the better part of the last two decades introducing ICT (information and communication technologies) to counselling was more of a happenstance process rather than a coordinated effort. Despite diverging practices, several trends have emerged at European level in the use of ICT in delivering counselling services. Based on a Europe wide survey we point out common practices and phenomena related to this area. While the community of practitioners has been quick to embrace the new environment, clients are slower in accessing web based counselling. Financing seems to be the mediating factor for the adoption of ICT tools within the different counselling systems. Facilitating the exchange of tools and practices would be a cost-effective way to encourage the use of ICT while maintaining an adequate quality standard.*

Keywords: *counselling services, ICT, European trends, good practices.*

I. ICT IN DELIVERING COUNSELLING SERVICES

Historically counselling and guidance have suffered from lack of innovation and purpose built tools. If we compare this field to medicine or sports, we can easily see a marked difference in the rate of development of new tools and methods. The advent of ICT has opened the possibility to create and implement numerous new instruments specifically designed for counselling and guidance.

Exploring trends in counselling in general (CEDEFOP, 2011 & 2008) and for the use of ICT in particular (Hooley et al., 2009; Watts & Dent, 2008) has been the focus of researchers aiming to support a meaningful integration of ICT in counselling for the benefit of potential clients of these services. The new technologies have offered quick and cost effective solutions to a large array of problems, from data management to guidance in the transition from school to the labour market. Sharing and accessing information is no longer something practitioners dream to do, but an everyday reality where choosing the instruments is not about whether it can be done, but rather how to do it best. Being able to keep track of clients has meant that their progress could be charted and could be used to support an evidence-based practice.

We are witnessing a shifting paradigm, from facilitating access to self-help tools and raw information, to an active relation between client and counsellor, as well as the establishment of communities for clients with similar interests (Majumdar, 2009). Clients are being encouraged to become autonomous and capable of planning their own career path, and to resort to professional counsellors when faced with challenges that require a more in-depth analysis.

With opportunity came also challenges, especially in regard to training the counselling professionals and providing adequate services based on the skills and needs of the client. The often

mentioned digital divide, between those that use ICT and those with limited access, has raised questions on how much of the counselling services can be provided through these media. Promoting ICT literacy is one of the goals of the counselling process which takes in account the fact that certain strata of society are being left behind by the lack of access to ICT.

Opposite to ICT (functional) illiteracy, we have ICT fatigue. People trying to ride the wave of change are often faced with a rapidly changing environment which demands a lot of energy when adapting to it. This in turn creates a feeling of being overburdened, which leads to different coping strategies: from skipping one or more generations of instruments to avoiding all new instruments that do not bring major benefits to the practitioner.

While there is little disagreement that career counselling services have benefited considerably from the use of new technologies, it seems that for the better part of the last two decades introducing ICT to counselling was a process that has lacked a planned and coordinated effort. While the factors that account for this situation are numerous and depend on the local context, it seems that the less counselling is perceived as generating economical benefits, for the provider of counselling and/or the economy as a whole, the less articulated the policy behind the use of ICT will be.

II. EUROPEAN TRENDS IN THE USE OF ICT IN COUNSELLING

2.1. Survey of practices

Despite diverging practices, several trends are emerging at European level in the use of ICT in delivering counselling services. We have conducted a Europe wide survey in the second half of 2011 inviting organizations that offer counselling services to provide us with examples of practices, initiatives, and policies regarding the use of ICT in counselling. A template for describing the practice was provided, with responses being collected and analyzed. Policy papers, reviews and statements from stakeholders were also taken in account.

In total about three dozen such examples have been taken into consideration from EU members and associated countries. They cover individual initiatives and partnerships with a large representation of public and private bodies, research facilities and practitioners' associations, career counselling and school counselling institutions and so on. A collection of detailed descriptions of the programmes/ projects/ initiatives surveyed will be available on the www.jobtribu.eu website in the second half of 2012.

2.2. Trends in the use of ICT

There is a growing need for web-based counselling services, but even the most developed counselling systems in Europe still report low numbers of clients compared to face-to-face counselling. Training courses for practitioners are high on the agenda of institutions employing their services, with the development of counselling tools (e.g. questionnaires, self-evaluation tools, data bases, etc.) equally important. The results of trainings and acquisition of equipment have not been as straight forward as was hoped for. For example a study conducted on Turkish counsellors found out that they were unaware of the tools available even though they had all been issued with standard equipment (Esoy Kart & Savcı, p. 180, 2011).

Our survey has identified two main focuses of projects aimed at improving the use of ICT in counselling and guidance services, namely *a) the development of tools* and *b) reflecting upon the process of using such instruments*. The gap between the two components is being bridged by the *training of practitioners*.

The *development of tools for counselling* has been the focus of both individual and collective efforts ever since computers and mobile devices have become affordable for the general public. As there is a high demand for dedicated tools that would be available for little or no costs to the practitioner, most projects that we have surveyed were related to the development of such tools. The

most common instruments developed were: self-promotion tools (e.g. video CV, e-Portfolio), career matching software (online and offline), online resource centres (e.g. job profiles, aptitude tests, job market information) and communication tools (e.g. chat, social networking websites, SMS information system). Some more complex tools tend to incorporate multiple functions in order to enable end-users to benefit the most from the services offered in one environment, thus eliminating the need to combine the services from several providers. Games are considered as having a high potential as tools for counselling and guidance (Hooley et al., 2010) but remain as yet an untapped resource.

The accessibility, their appeal to the end user and their overall efficiency has to be taken in account when designing new tools. Researchers and developers are often tempted to create new environments to share information such as virtual campuses and counselling offices in Second Life, which are very innovative, but have proven to have a low accessing and return rates from the clients.

Reflecting upon the process of introducing ICT to counselling is the focus of a large part of the projects and initiatives that we have surveyed. Quality assurance, building the research and development capacity, mapping the skills needed by a practitioner (Botnariuc, 2009), the ethics of introducing ICT to counselling were among the topics addressed. Introducing formal quality standards like ISO standards has been considered as potentially inefficient (Evangelista, 2009), with peer evaluation and self regulation being better suited. However, providing quality services within the framework proposed by the new technologies is part of the ethics of providing online services (Vuorinen & Sampson, 2009). Research and development are important functions of counselling services, and practitioners are expected to be able to reflect on their skills and their practices in order to take the appropriate measures to constantly improve them.

The transfer of the results of projects related to the process of introducing ICT to counselling and guidance is very important, as it tends to be expensive inquire into such matters. Prior validation of instruments and methods before transfer is equally important, as regional contexts tend to vary in terms of preparedness of the counsellors to adopt them and the needs of the clients they are expected to address.

Training the practitioners on how to use these tools and how to enable their clients to access services and information through them is the way the institutions involved aim to bridge the gap between the reflective and practical parts of introducing ICT to counselling. Depending on the scope of the organizations providing the training, they can be focused either on a well-defined domain (e.g. labour market counselling) or on a broader approach aiming to bring together practitioners from across the counselling spectrum.

The training needs of practitioners vary from one regional context to another. While some practitioners are expected to use a standard set of ICT tools and are not expected to engage the client outside a well defined framework, others are encouraged to find their own approaches to the integration of ICT in their work. While quality assurance could be easier to monitor in the first setting, the second one is more flexible in regard to the practitioner's needs and counselling style.

While the community of practitioners has been quick to embrace the new environment, clients are slower in accessing web based counselling. This seems to be in correlation with the use of ICT within the general population of a certain country or region. Also, age differences are evident between those more likely to access such services and those who prefer face to face counselling. Generations of clients that grew up with technology at their fingertips are more likely to seek counselling through the new media and be more comfortable with this type of interaction.

While great attention has been paid to the benefits the counsellor can derive from implementing ICT in his practice, less attention has been devoted to the benefits of the client. For example an online careers matching portal with 3D graphics may look as a breakthrough achievement for the institution offering it, but it may prove to be disorienting and lacking in appeal for the client. This raises the question of the appropriate moment to use the ICT in the process of counselling. It is generally agreed that ICT should not be seen as a means to replace face-to-face counselling, but a way to address specific needs in certain contexts.

An issue that has not received enough scrutiny is the training of clients in using the new media when accessing information relevant for the transition between different educational or work stages in his life. The counsellor is expected to empower his beneficiaries in acquiring new tools to their personal portfolio, but there have been few initiatives to show them how to achieve this goal.

2.3. Financing the introduction of ICT in counselling

Financing seems to be the mediating factor for the adoption of ICT tools within the different counselling systems. Counselling in general and career counselling in particular have been regarded across Europe as being mostly the responsibility of the state, as the main beneficiary of the improvement of employability of its citizens. This has meant that both individual states and supranational entities have had to implement instruments of financial support for the development of counselling and guidance. Countries that devote larger grants to research and development in this area have acquired purpose-built tools, while lower investment has meant having to adapt the applications designed for general use in education or in other areas.

European Union funding has been an important source for the development, as it has offered the opportunity to pool intellectual and material resources from all over Europe with the common goal of pushing forward the boundaries of counselling, and offering better services.

It is rare for a client to pay for counselling and guidance, and thus the market for such services is built around providers that have to find financing through other means. Private initiatives are largely dependent on state or EU awarded grants, with very few private institutions being to generate enough revenue from services provided to the general public. Overall we can note that ICT instruments used in counselling, while expensive to develop, in time they prove to be cost effective. Practitioners in general tend to use either free or low cost instruments, with the freemium model (where some core components are free, and the user can opt to pay for some premium features) proving to be successful in some instances.

Given the fact that financing is a thorny issue in many European countries, facilitating the exchange of tools and practices would be a cost-effective way to encourage the use of ICT while maintaining an adequate quality standard.

III. CONCLUSIONS

In the relatively short time that ICT has been available to counsellors it has proven to be of considerable help to everyday activities and will probably continue to grow and become even more intertwined with counselling services. It is the responsibility of researchers and practitioners alike to find meaningful ways of using ICT without compromising on quality standards and ethics.

Networks like Euroguidance and ELGPN have been successful in promoting cooperation on a Europe wide scale by facilitating contacts between practitioners (e.g. Academia Study Visits Programme), providing resources for counselling and guidance, proposing and promoting policies, defining priorities and guidelines. However, communication between centres that have developed ICT resources for counselling is not yet at the level that allows for an efficient exchange of practices. Many tools and initiatives go unnoticed by their potential beneficiaries for lack of proper communication.

The client should not be left out of the picture when deciding on the training provided to practitioners. It is often the case that the counsellors are offering services through the new media that are either beyond the grasp of their clients or outdated in terms of hardware and/or software.

It seems that there is still some way to go before technology, practitioners and clients are able to achieve the perfect balance between needs and means, but undoubtedly considerable progress has been made. As practitioners and clients grow more accustomed to technology, and the tools are better tailored to counselling activities, we expect that the near future will bring us closer to the dynamic equilibrium we are hoping to achieve.

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