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From the University to the professional world: users' evaluation of a consulting service for orientation at work

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Abstract

The present contribution aims to present the results from a consulting service for orientation at work envisaged by the Co.S.I.P. (Consulting and Integrated Services for Placement), at the University of Bari. Its goal is to investigate the effects of the intervention starting from the perception of change by the service user in relation to three areas of study: knowledge of themselves, knowledge of appropriate tools, and knowledge of the territory (Fraccaroli,Rossi, 1999). The sample consists of 20 subjects, undergraduates and graduates with an average age of 26.5 years. The study was conducted using a quantitative/qualitative methodology, using a semi-structured interview and a questionnaire to assess how many of and how well the goals of service users were achieved in the different areas. Participation in the activities provided by this service was considered an important moment for personal reflection. In addition, the need to define the service users own professional identity was accompanied by the need to draw up an individualized career path and, therefore, *ad hoc* in relation to skills and interests in different professional areas.

Key words: university to work transition, personal skills evaluation, academic tutorial system.

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Introduction

Different meanings are applied to the word "orientation" depending on the context, the interpretations and the theoretical approach. The term *orientation*, then, is the process through which the individual manages its own educational and professional experiences on the one hand, and the interventions delivered by experienced professionals, through the use of specific methodologies, techniques and instruments, on the other (Pombeni, 1996: 87). Thus understood, orientation is considered a path that lasts the entire life of a person who will appeal to all those who need information and support during a transitional phase and decision-making processes: students, teenagers seeking first time employment, adults made redundant or wanting to update their skills to be more productive and competitive in the labour market, women and minority groups that need to enter the labour force for the first time, people with disabilities to assume greater control over their lives, unemployed, retirees (Herr,1984:301), and recovering drug addicts and alcoholics whose entry in the professional world is particularly problematic. According to a definition by UNESCO (1970), "orientate means that an individual is self-aware and is able to adapt his studies and his profession to the changing demands of life with the dual objective of contributing to the advancement of society and to achieve the full development of the person". Considering the studies on the evolution of the concept of orientation, this definition refers in particular to the maturational-personal approach, one of the main stages that has characterised this evolution (Di Fabio, 1998). At this stage, the individual's active role in his selection process and guidance assumes importance on the one hand, while on the other the continuous nature of orientation means it does not end at any particular time, but grows throughout working life, as stated by Super (1957) in his "life space model", life span career development – development of personal and professional career throughout one's life.

As part of the orientation process, the psychosocial transition situations are grouped into three categories (Pombeni, 1994): related to decision-making processes that relate to times when the individual has to decide on school and professional career; impact or related to the inclusion in educational and new contexts; connected to a role or loss of one, to a lack of training/working activity (such as school leavers and adult unemployment).

Guidance assumes a prominent role especially during the phase of transition to work (Nicholson, 1981), which represents a particularly delicate and important moment in everyone's life, because it constitutes a radical change both in relation to the organizational context and the social role. The impact of the world of work makes individuals address new experiences: get in touch with a new social reality, different from that previously experienced and known; meet people, environments, different organizational rules and standards on which to model their conduct and actions. They must also take on new responsibilities and tasks that contribute to a change in their social role and, with it, their self-concept.

Starting work constitutes a profound cognitive, emotional and behavioural restructuring. It requires the use of personal resources to check and verify one's ability to act in the new environment (Sarchielli, 2003). The transition from the world of education to the world of work, has generated interest and led to the initiation of several projects within the university. All universities have, in fact, a placement service. It does not replace public service agencies, but becomes an integral part of this process(Ingusci et. al; 2010; Palano, et. al, 2010; Tanucci,et.al.,2011). The study of transition processes (Herr,1984) resulted in the launch of guidance and services

aimed at improving employability (ISFOL, 2003) and identifying the areas of competence, motivation and interests of the service users. (Pombeni, 1998). Guidance services provided by universities have helped develop methodologies for intervention and counselling designed to promote work placement locations and aimed at facilitating the transition from the student status to the employable individual, i.e., a subject that is "usable" dynamic and which possesses the skills, tools and strategies to move actively in the labour market. The study of transition processes is strongly connected to the systems put in place to prepare and enhance careers, starting from an adequate understanding of the match between supply and demand of work through the analysis of pathways. This analysis seeks to identify different paths, firstly, the skills required to make people more employable. And, then, the most effective ways to learn them as well as more favourable situations for their labour market enhancement (ISFOL, 2003). To sum up the key concept is: employability that is an interactive process between individuals, businesses and educational institutions as well as any social networks the subject may have. Applying the concept of employability to young people has raised other important issues different from those of those who must reintegrate themselves into the labor market (the unemployed or the weaker sector of society); the problem that faces new graduates is an inadequate match between the supply and demand for work.

Of great importance are the ways in which the individual makes himself available for work and the personal resources that he is able to activate creatively. Job seekers that make the move from training to work are equipped with resources that include: cognitive capital, acquired in formal training courses; the perception in their ability to make effective decisions and adapted to the context (called decision making self-efficacy) (Taylor, Betz; 1983; Swanson,

1995); the development of strategies to search actively for a job. These strategies are the networking abilities, that is the abilities to acquire information through a network of knowledge and reports of personal and professional life that, to be effective, must gradually increase (Tziner, 2004); subjective priorities; the motivation; relationship networks and social capital acquired and/or activated (ISFOL, 2003).

Entry into employment represents a critical and delicate phase of socialization for young people and, social factors play an important role in this context (family, peer group), just as educational institutions and businesses do. They help to strengthen or to weaken the skills required to increase employability (Giddens, 1994) skills which are continuously developing. This process is also enriched by the use of effective networking strategies that the individual puts into place (Tziner, a. et al.; 2004) within what is called job search intensity (Georgiou et. al., 2012; Schwab, 1987) that becomes part of the job search process in conjunction with career exploration (Werbel, 2000). In this area, universities have taken on an important role not only in providing students with an academic education but also in giving them the skills and qualities necessary to enter into the world of work. The introduction of traineeships in most degree programs is an example. These experiences are included in the curriculum, and develop training projects with the aim of creating a bridge between academia and the world of work. The orientation developed by the university to support students in the process of choosing, cover three main aspects: incoming orientation, in which attention is paid to the transition from high school to university education; on-going orientation, in which a tutorial system is activated to help students choose their learning path; and outbound orientation, which covers looking for employment (Amoretti, Rania, 2005).

With this in mind, the University in Bari occupies a position of great importance in relation to the complex system of orientation and activities in an effort to create a network between the various institutions, to facilitate meeting supply and demand. The University of Bari, organizes a series of qualified and distinctive initiatives, among which Co.S.I.P. (Consulting and Integrated Services for Placement) stands out, a service provided by the ORU (vocational guidance) as part of a larger mentorship project which also handles inbound orientation (ORE) and on-going guidance (ORI). This Co.S.I.P. project aims to support and steer individuals in the crucial phase of transition from university to the workplace. Taking advantage of various tools and methodologies, this service facilitates the job of undergraduates and graduates, providing them with a substantial amount of information on the labour market, greater awareness about their own resources and limits, with the opportunity to develop new skills, and a change of attitude towards the professional and socio-economic realities. To achieve these goals, during period of six consecutive months, several initiatives were implemented to help graduates and undergraduates who had joined the proposed guidance path, such as professional workshops, develop and strengthen professional skills of users; job meeting and workshops, to allow for direct contact with the reality of employment; job placement, to support the graduate in a process of self-evaluation and skills recognition and to define a plan of development for professional career. The purpose of this study is to evaluate the project (as required by Co.S.I.P) from the users' viewpoint. The evaluation can be defined as *ex post*, i.e., made after a certain period of time from the completion of the project, and aims to investigate the impact of the service on users, all the effects of the changes and achievements by trying to retrace the different stages, according to the reconstruction provided by the individuals involved.

Methodology

In order to evaluate the activities organized by the Co.S.I.P. project, the service users who had finished using the service were contacted by telephone to explain the research objectives. They were asked if they would be willing to participate in the research and if they would be available for a meeting. Two different methods were used to collect data. First there was a semi-structured interview to gather information on the changes and effects the service had on service users (Atkinson, 1998). Each interview was conducted by asking open questions, the question order was at the discretion of the interviewer. Each interview was recorded and later it was put on a file in Word format, ensuring service users confidentiality.

All the interviews contained certain areas of study, such as the reasons for using the service, the nature of the sources of information for publicising the project and the meetings held from time to time, the outcome of the experience concerning labour market knowledge, attitudes toward work, self-assessment of skills, the kind of own professional action plan and the strategies developed to make it; finally other area of study is the overall judgement on the initiatives of the service Co.S.I.P. with special attention to the relationship between expectations and goals and to the relationship with the people working on this project.

In addition, service users were given a short structured questionnaire in order to collect information systematically to identify the successful points of the project and those that had given rise to doubts and dissatisfaction with the failure to achieve the laid down objectives. It consisted of:

▪ The first part involved collecting information on the socio-demographic

data of the individuals (sex, age, current situation, residence, professional status before and after the educational intervention, possible participation in other similar projects);

- The second section referred to activities carried out during the journey; 30 goals were identified and individuals indicated how well or if they had achieved the goals on a scale (from level 1 = "no goal achieved" to level 7 = "objective completely achieved"). The 30 items dealt with the perception of the individuals in relation to the changes in the three areas of study (each of which is represented by 10 items):
  1. Self-knowledge, i.e., that part of the project that aims to enhance individuals' self-awareness and develop skills that enable them to evaluate their own personal qualities/skills.
  2. Knowledge of appropriate tools, knowledge gained through participation in the workshops of the Co.S.I.P. service.
  3. Knowledge of the territory, which is intended to provide information about opportunities in the local labour market and to stimulate a comparison of their resources and the power of context (Fraccaroli, Rossi,1999).
- The last part of the questionnaire explored the perceived effectiveness of users. It consisted of 14 statements that described difficult situations for them to deal with and indicated how able they felt to cope with the situation by giving each item a value from 1 to 7 on a scale (from 1 = "not able" to 7 = "quite capable").

Subjects

The sample comprised 20 subjects (35% male and 65% female) with a mean age of 27 years. Most respondents (13 out of 20 in total) were university graduates, only 3 were newly graduated and 4 were graduating at the time of using the service. They belonged to various degree courses at the Università degli Studi di Bari (Economics, Law, Literature and Philosophy, Science Education, Scientific and Technical faculties).

Half of the subjects (10 out of 20) stated that they were unemployed at the start of the training exercise; some (5) were seeking first time employment and others (5) were already working. The professional status of the users sample remained unchanged after the period of consultancy. The employment status of respondents, therefore, was the same before and after participating in the Co.S.I.P. project. Slight variations can be observed with respect to the type of employment of those already employed, but, these changes are not attributable to the initiative that took part in. Only 2 subjects claimed to have attended other similar orientation activities at work. For all other users, Co.S.I.P. service was their first experience in orientation to work.

Discussion

An analysis was made of interview texts contents via T-LAB, software for the exploration, observation and analysis of different types of texts. A file in txt format was set up for processing. The corpus consisted of interviews from 20 individuals who had taken part in the Co.S.I.P project and who had contributed to the investigation. Two functions implemented in T-LAB were used:

- Associations of words: it verifies the "meanings" of every single word in the corpus. The greater the proximity of the headword analysed with the word placed in the centre, the higher the level of coexistence of the two headwords observed within the text. The function is used for the words work, expertise, universities, and orientation. Below are the results of

the analysis in relation to the term "university".

- Map of thematic units: it presents an overview that summarizes the global significance of the corpus. As it can

methods (as the tools already described) and qualitative methods (such as the analysis and interpretation of elementary contexts, parts of the body where there are words in analysis) emphasises:
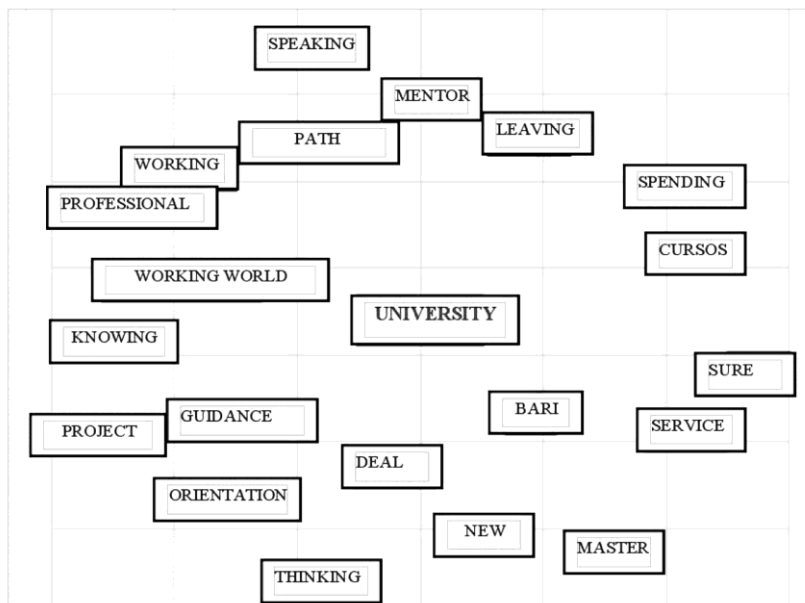

Fig. 1: Association of words - FOCUS on the term <UNIVERSITA'>

be observed in Figure 2, the graph shows a set of keywords arranged in an orderly manner within a two-dimensional space. In this space, there are two axes (X, Y-horizontal-vertical) that allow to organize all the keywords in relation to two themes: the vertical axis focuses on the ego and the actions to be implemented, while the horizontal axis represents the world-dialogue itself compared to the individual's work. Based on two previously identified themes, the words take on meaning and relevance.

The content analysis of interviews, through the triangulation of quantitative

- the importance attached by the parties to play an active role in the search for work, the awareness of the need to take adequate instruments to actively choose between different career opportunities and the negation of a passive attitude and realistic expectations.
- the considerations that nourish users to make use of the service, intended both as an aid for those who approach the world of professions and as an opportunity for skills training, and as an effective way to join the workforce.
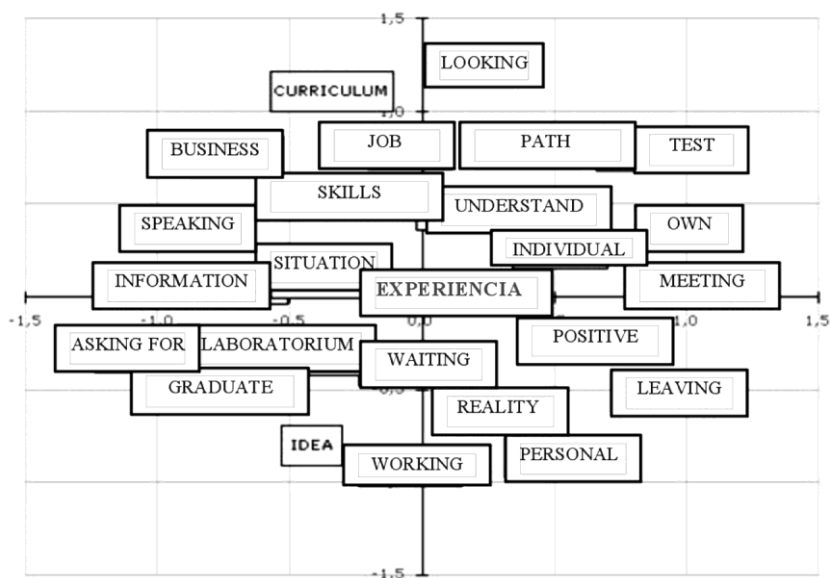- the perception of distance between the university and the world of work and

Fig. 2: Map of thematic units

the lack of an actual contact between the two.

As regards the questionnaire, data was processed using a quantitative analysis system using Excel and a specific software for social sciences (SPSS statistical program for social sciences) in order to investigate the changes experienced by the users, after participation in the programme in relation to the above three areas of study: knowledge of oneself, knowledge of proper tools, and knowledge of the area.

The responses of 20 participants are summarised in the following table which lists the mean and standard deviation for the three groups of objectives.

Fig. 3: Means and standard deviations for the aims of each area

Area	Mean	D. S.
1. knowledge of oneself	4.63	. 28
2. knowledge of proper tools	4.68	. 53
3. knowledge of the local market	4.08	. 37

Taking into account that the higher the score the higher the perception of achievement of the goals (1 = "no goal achieved"; 7 = "objective completely achieved"), it is evident that all the ratings were positive.

In particular, it may be noted as:

▪ The objectives related to the first and the second areas of study (self-knowledge and knowledge of the appropriate tools, respectively) were judged to be reached by almost the

entire reference sample and averages are very similar to each other.

- The objectives related to the third area of work, knowledge of the territory, yielded statistically lower scores although, overall, they were average.

The values in the third column of the table refer to the standard deviation. It indicates minimum variability between responses from users of the Co.S.I.P project. This shows conviction of the individuals to share their evaluation. They did not just quickly answer the questionnaire or responded in order to please the interviewer, but thought about their answers using critical reflection. As already stated, it can be said that the perception of a successful initiative prevails among participants as well as the impression of effectiveness of the training exercise.

Conclusions

Considering the results of the service evaluation, some important conclusions can be drawn. Users' expectations and requests of service were carried out and fulfilled. The individuals, in fact, recognized the added value provided by such an experience, especially by participating in job placement, which, through the stages of self-evaluation and hetero-evaluation, increased users' awareness of their capabilities and potentials, and the adherence to professional workshops, which allowed the acquisition of specific skills and relevant information for effectively entering into the labour market. However, there are some sections of the route about which, with regard to the actual achievement of objectives, users have expressed doubts and dissatisfaction. Most of the group considered stated that the experience had not been completely satisfactory with respect to the direct contact with the world of work.

It might be useful, then, to create a more effective union, to continue to achieve the integration between academia and the world of work, organize more job meetings and workshops or modify existing ones to make them more dynamic and more profitable, in order to provide graduates and undergraduates with more testimonies from experts from different sectors, with a complete overview of the employment opportunities in the territory and a comprehensive knowledge of current and emerging skills which are most sought after by companies.

Another proposal, expressed directly by respondents, refers to the possibility that the Co.S.I.P. project performs a series of paths at a higher level of customization, or *ad hoc* processes in relation to skills by the participants and shaped according to their specific needs and interests in different professional areas. This request was made by some people who expected to devise, through their participation in the Advisory Service, a clear and concrete plan to follow a particular career path or set out to develop a customised business plan to be implemented in the short term with appropriate strategies.

Indeed, this expectation is very ambitious and difficult to satisfy for front line operators, but, to meet the needs of our group of subjects, training could be arranged for small groups of service users with similar professional interests. The number of individual interviews could be increased so that it is easier for the operator to understand the actual motivations and problems of each participant and, in the light of these, provide adequate tools to make responsible choices, for both graduates and undergraduates, in doing so, they would feel a more intense support during this complex transition phase and would gain greater strength and confidence in themselves to achieve certain objectives.

Based on the findings of this evaluation consulting path promoted by Co.S.I.P. the University in Bari, makes

some considerations regarding future prospects:

- Evaluation of users and operators. It might be interesting to explore the implications for the role of operators (Pombeni, 1996) who offer their Co.S.I.P Service Consulting. In doing so, it would be able to evaluate the project from two different perspectives and, through adequate understanding of the two positions and a comparison between them, significant and useful conclusions could be identified with a view to a future implementation of the service.

- International benchmarking activities. An analysis of national and international benchmarking, can be considered interesting and complementary to the previous research. this analysis could focus not only on vocational guidance services (aimed to undergraduates and graduates students) but also on all orientation programs from the first year students at University, according to "lifelong learning" perspective and the skills development for a promotion of the employability (ISFOL, 2003) and to support the transition process during and after obtaining an academic degree. It would also be interesting to highlight those consulting services that develop in both Italian and foreign universities (Job Placement) as well as the Career Centre which can be found online, for everyone who needs advice on how to design their future. From a sociological perspective, one could finally investigate aspects in common and those that differentiate the different realities, in relation to cultural and geographic factors on the one hand and globalization standards on the other.

- Self-efficacy perception. Considering the studies undertaken within the framework of social cognitive Theory, the construct of effectiveness is an important variable with respect to:

  - the relationship between constructs and achievements, by users, of the objectives set out by the Co.S.I.P project;
  - Career decision-making self-efficacy (Taylor and Betz, 1983): strategies for job seeking, work locus of control (Gilardi, et al. 2004) and professional values (Waters, 2000);

- Job search intensity. Looking for work, both actively and effectively, are considered two fundamental aspects: career exploration and job search intensity that, as part of the professional selection process involves efficient collection of career information that is relevant to the interests and skills of job seekers. Job seekers (those who are looking for work) put in place different behaviours and specific strategies that are classified as sources of information. The studies suggest two categories of strategies: formal/structured or explicit (Career centres, placement services), soft or informal/hidden (Mau, Kopischke, 2001). The strategies and methods of job search refer to two categories and, in particular, in the second category the strategy used is networking (Tziner, et al. 2004). It would be interesting to explore job search intensity in relation to job search strategies, considering, additionally, the demographic characteristics (age, gender, and education) and the duration of unemployment.

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Tutorías en Educación Superior

Esta publicación nace como respuesta a la necesidad de contar con materiales para el intercambio, el estudio y la difusión de los actuales sistemas de tutorías, dado que no se registran revistas científicas específicas del tema a nivel nacional. Sus destinatarios no sólo serán los docentes que hoy se desempeñan como tutores, sino docentes, autoridades y alumnos que se interesen en el tema. Es una revista científica con una periodicidad anual y se presentará en dos formatos en simultáneo, uno digital y otro en papel para que pueda ser distribuido a todas las bibliotecas de la universidades nacionales e instituciones relacionadas a la temática de las tutorías universitarias.

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