
A European inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning:

Examples of Good Practice – ELBUS, Norway

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1.0 EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE - ELBUS, NORWAY

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1.1 Introduction

The lead organisation, ELBUS, is the National Centre for Electro technical vocational post education in Norway. It is a not-for-profit organisation owned by NELFO (The Electro technical Contractors' Association) and EL & IT (The Norwegian Electro technical Workers' Union). ELBUS together with other partners from Norway and 4 other countries developed a methodology to map key competences and skills in electro-technology companies in order to be able to better match the business development strategies with professional competences, skills and aspirations of employees and potential employees. A fundamental element of this methodology was development of a process to identify, document and assess professional and social skills of employees and potential employees. In general terms, this means highlighting visibility of learning taken place outside of formal training and education system.

Project target groups are employees and human resource managers in the electro-technical industry.

1.2 Description of the initiative

Rationale

The project developed pan-European methodological tool for documenting and assessing accumulated professional and social knowledge and skills of employees / potential employees in the electro-technology sector. Accumulated knowledge and skills here refer to learning acquired outside of formal education and training.

Working in partnership

The methodology was developed by the leading partner ELBUS together with national bodies, sectoral associations and vocational training centres from Denmark, Sweden, United Kingdom, Norway, and Greece. The methodology has been piloted and tested (this process is still on-going today) by electro-technology companies in each partner country.

Motivation

The driving forces for the development of the methodology for ELBUS were:

- Difficult situation in the electro-technology market – need to increase competitiveness of businesses in the sector.
- Unemployment in the sector was very low and staff turnover levels had grown rapidly in recent years (especially in Norway, Sweden and Denmark). These factors caused serious concern in the industry and rapid action was required to improve job retention in the sector.

- Increasing international workforce mobility. Gradually more and more electricians in Norway had expressed an interest to work abroad, while immigration to Norway was also in increase. A complete lack of validation initiatives in the sector and inability to transfer electrician qualifications from country to country in Europe due to legal restrictions were the key incentives to develop a system to record and compare competences and skills.
- Professional development of electricians – the methodology would also allow to identify *desired* competences and professional aspirations of employees and therefore offer more transparent personal development routes.

One of the companies which has implemented the methodology is Dalhaug AB - one of the leading Norwegian companies in the electro-technology sector. The company employs some 100 persons and 90 per cent of the employees are currently going through the process to validate their informal and non-formal learning.

Dalhaug AB got involved in the initiative for three key reasons:

- Firstly, the company requires increasingly educated and highly skilled staff in the future.
- Secondly, the company wanted to screen and map the competences of its workforce to ensure they have right skills in-house to meet the strategic objectives of the company.
- Finally, the process offers better career progression routes and more room for personal development and growth for those who are motivated/capable to move forward in the company.

Validation activities in the sector

Adoption of initiatives to validate skills and competences of employees in the electro-technology sector is not very common because the sector is characterised by small businesses with approximately 15 employees. Such small businesses in this sector have very little expertise or resources to set up such initiatives.

Furthermore, anyone working in the sector in Europe must hold an official certificate to legally work in the sector. And these certificates can only be obtained from a formal education institute. This has partly reduced companies interest to recognise informal and non-formal learning of their employees.

Project funding

Project was funded by the project partners with assistance from the European Commission, Leonardo da Vinci programme.

Companies implementing the methodology have not contributed to the development of the tool but allocate time and staff resources for the implementation.

How is learning assessed?

The process consists of four different elements:

CV

The first part of the assessment is focussed on gathering information about skills, knowledge, expertise, competences and other attributes that employee/potential employee possess – attributes that can be of value in their work. A three-part CV is used to record this information in a systematic manner. The CV covers information on personal details, professional skills and general skills:

- Personal details
- Official qualifications
- Education and courses
- Social skills (family life, social activities, interests)
- Local community and voluntary activities (memberships in different commissions/councils/societies, voluntary work experience)
- Hobbies
- Professional skills, work experience
- Desires, motivation and intentions with regards to their career progression.

Professional competences and experience are categorised to 30-40 subjects and each ranked according to three standards:

- Theoretical understanding of the process/task.
- Ability to carry out the task, but not without supervision.
- Ability to carry out the task alone without any help or support.

CV is available electronically to all employees.

Ability to Take Action - questionnaire

The final step of the process for employees is a discussion with their employer about future, development, training and aspirations. To aid the development of dialogue with employer and employee, the project has developed an 'Ability to take action' questionnaire. The questionnaire refers to issues such as ability and motivation to learn and train further, career aspirations, team working and analytical skills and communication capabilities. The questionnaire is available in an electronic format to all employees.

Personal Development Plan

Finally a discussion with an employer will be held, based on what the individual has recorded about him/herself on the CV and Ability to take action – questionnaire. The discussion follows defined guidelines and is strictly confidential between individual and employer. Discussion will lead to a personal development plan for each individual employee and different personal development measures (such as in-house or formal training courses) are discussed.

Skills gap analysis can be carried out after the skills and competences of employees are recorded on the system. Mapping tool is used to carry out the analysis.

Mapping tool

The mapping tool is a web-based programme of which content is based on the information recorded by employees about their skills, expertise, competences and aspirations. The tool was originally developed as a part of another project by AOF – Norwegian national training organisation. Only some adjustments to the tool were required, and this saved a significant amount of time and financial resources.

The tool mainly functions as a instrument for better human resource management and strategic planning. The aim of the tool is to identify skills gaps in an organisation and allow those with motivation and capabilities to move forward in the company. The mapping analysis allows the company also see whether relevant skills can be found in-house, for example, for development of new markets.

The mapping tool can be found at:
<http://komptest.prodoc.no> (password protected)

1.3 Outcomes and benefits

The process has brought mutual benefits for individuals, enterprises and industry in general and increased awareness of validation of informal and non-formal learning in the sector. The following benefits have been experienced by nearly all project partners in different European countries:

For the individuals

The interests of individual employees are central to this project. The key benefit for employees is creation of personal development plan that improves employees' training and career progression opportunities. And perhaps most importantly, employees feel more valued.

For the company

Identification and recognition of informal and non-formal learning has improved effectiveness of companies' human resource policies and management; the process enables companies more effectively allocate their human resources. By better understanding resources of their workforce companies can improve their strategic planning and adaptability to the changing market needs. And most importantly, the experience so far has demonstrated that the implementation of the tool has increased motivation and commitment of their staff. Personal development plan and more meaningful dialogue between employer and employee make employees feel more valued and in the longer run this is expected to increase productivity of the company (through lower staff turnover levels etc.). Validation of information and non-formal learning is also good for the reputation and marketing of the company. In the long term, this type of validation activity may also help the enterprise to establish itself abroad as the tool enables the company to identify and compare knowledge and skills of employees regardless of their country of origin.

Experience from Dalhaug AB

Although the company is only now going through the implementation process (90 per cent of employees have recorded their skills and competences and personal development plans are being developed), clear benefits have already been identified. Employees feel more valued than before. The project has also enabled the management to discover specific training needs and offer employees short term and/or part time training. The process has also allowed the management to recognise individuals who have potential or skills to take up further responsibilities or further develop new business areas.

The company views this as an initial step towards long term process of further promoting lifelong learning and recognising informal and non-formal learning.

Wider impact

Experiences from five European countries have shown that the European electro-technical industry will benefit from harmonised documentation procedure to aid identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning. The tool addresses difficulties encountered by those hoping to work in the sector in another European country - it offers more accurate and rapid assessment and validation of skills and competences of foreign workers, refugees and other immigrants.

Electro-technical companies have traditionally valued their workforce mainly as a static mechanism for income - which up to now has proved successful. But this has meant that they have not kept up with the increasing need to nurture continued learning among their workforce; younger generation has an increasing capability and motivation to change, adapt and face up new challenges. At the same time companies have to become increasingly adaptable and possess higher levels of skills and expertise in order to remain competitive. The project makes a significant contribution to this goal by offering a methodology to assess informal and non-formal learning of employees.

1.4 Sustainability and transferability

The project's documentation procedure and associated tool were developed to take into account differences in different national contexts. The tool has been tested in five different European electro-technical companies and therefore has demonstrated that the tool and methodology does work in different countries and contexts.

The project is viewed as an example of good practice in validation of informal and non-formal learning. The project methodology was one of three to receive the first ever Leonardo da Vinci award launched by the Directorate General for Education and Culture of the European Commission.

The project meets a real demand in the electro-technical sector. Both the process and the method in general are transferable and adaptable to related industries and other organisations. The transfer only requires small adjustments to the web tool. It may also be possible to make the process, the method and the web-based tool and supported tools (questionnaire and CV) commercially available.

The future of the project and tool is slightly uncertain at the very moment because ELBUS, the R&D branch of the Norwegian employer organisation, was recently shut down. But ELBUS employees who are still working for the same owner organisations (employer organisation / trade union) are determined to take the project forward.

1.5 Barriers

The project has shown that it is possible to record, compare and assess skills and competences of electricians from different countries. At the moment, however, there is no way of comparing electrician qualifications from different countries or formally validate work experience; currently electricians in all European countries have to attend formal education to obtain licence to work as a qualified electrician.

Another barrier for companies in the sector to get involved in validation activities is the general small size of companies, most companies in the electro-technology sector are small and medium size businesses. These companies find it difficult to find time to get involved in such schemes. The project partnership for example found it quite difficult to find companies to participate the project as pilot companies. SME managers in the sector also do not have as comprehensive understanding of validation initiatives and their benefits as HR departments of larger companies in which in-house training and validation schemes are often a lot more established.

In relation to these points, some employers in the sector do not yet view training, recognition of wider set of skills and expertise and personal development of their staff as a priority matter as all their electricians already hold a formal certificate. But this is likely to change in the future.

1.6 Supportive policy frameworks

The last few years have seen a record-breaking increase in both mobility of workforce between European countries and immigration in a wider sense as well. At the same time staff turnover levels in the electro-technical industry have grown rapidly. Consequently the need to be able to accurately and efficiently assess knowledge and skills of potential (and existing employees) is all the time more important. Consequently, companies in the sector hope more direct support (human resources, guidance or funding) from the national governments.

1.7 Conclusions

This case study demonstrates particularly effective and comprehensive practice in the way it identifies and assesses informal and non-formal learning. The way the methodology also takes into consideration ‘soft-skills’, hobbies, interests, motivation for career progression is quite unique.

The project outcome is not something tangible, certificate for example, which would be nationally recognised but is something which offers better career progression route for employees in the industry that is traditionally very much focussed on formal education.

The methodological concept was designed longer term sustainability and transferability to different countries and sectors in mind.