

*Assessing voluntary experience (AVE) in a
professional perspective*

Report of experimentation

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Introduction

In the fourth step of the project “AVE in a professional perspective”, an experimentation of the method and tool for assessing voluntary experiences has been forecasted in order to take into account the national contexts.

Each of the partners had to experiment the tool and method, on the basis of the general framework agreed upon in London in November 2004.

The AVE device comprehends:

- a portfolio for the volunteers : portfolio of skills and qualifications acquired and assessable in a professional perspective ;
- a guide for the users : information on the AVE project together with explanation on the process (portfolio) and its aims (going back on the labour market).

Concerning the experimentation, two conditions were to be followed:

- the portfolio should be experimented among volunteers fulfilling two conditions : having a representative experience in volunteering (to be defined) ; willing to use the voluntary experience to comeback on the labour market ;
- a general framework was adopted : Presentation of the organisation ; Missions fulfilled by the volunteer in the organisation ; Competences/skills acquired and developed ; Level of experience (self-evaluation) ; Synthesis documents : Curriculum vitae of the voluntary experience, training followed during the voluntary experience ; Possible additional documents (such as the leaflet of the association ..).

We will develop the following points:

- presentation of the portfolio experimented : hypothesis of work, reference to the general framework agreed upon during the meeting in London, starting point if any portfolio already existed ;
- synthesis of the experimentation among volunteers : profiles, main goals, reactions and proposals ;
- synthesis of the experimentation among associations : profiles, main goals, reactions and proposals ;
- synthesis of the experimentation among people responsible for human resources : profiles, reactions and ways they could integrate/use our tool and method ;
- main conclusions and proposals.

The experimentation made so far in France comprehends two parts:

- first in Ile de France together with the Cicos : three sessions with volunteers and associations have been organised in March and April 2005 ; one session was organised with people responsible for human resources (national employment agency, ANPE national vocational training bodies, AFPA...)
- second in Champagne Ardennes together with the Youth and Sports Regional Direction in May 2005 : a session organised with the associations mainly in the field of Youth and Sports.

In addition to these formal meeting, informal contacts and meeting with people involved in the field of volunteering and competencies have enriched the experimentation.

1. Presentation of the portfolio experimented

The tools experimented in France were both: a portfolio for the volunteers; a leaflet for any association or trainer willing to support the volunteer in the AVE process.

Concerning the method used, the portfolio is based on an auto-evaluation, a personal guide for the volunteer; the leaflet is also a guide for the associations explaining the context and the steps to follow when accompanying volunteers in the Ave process.

In the first part of the portfolio, the objectives of such a tool are reminded: a definition of the portfolio of competences is proposed; the self-evaluation part is also focussed. The main goal is to propose a common basis of analysis, a reference document both for the volunteers but also for the associations.

The second part of the portfolio proposes a list of missions fulfilled during the voluntary work. A definition of a mission is given to avoid any misunderstanding. A list of 13 missions is proposed together with the description of their content and some examples to be well understood. There is also an item “other” as the list shouldn’t be exhaustive. The volunteer has to select 3 to 5 missions to express them in his/her own words; any comment is of course welcome.

The third part is the core of the portfolio with the description of the competences acquired or developed. Another time, the definition of a competence is given, on the basis of the Cedefop glossary with some precision as the words used appeared to be too loose. A typology of the competences, on the basis of the proposal made by our Italian partners in the questionnaire dispatched, comprehends operational, general or transferable and specific competences. There are nine operational competences proposed; thirteen general competences plus a list of ten qualities; nine specific competences that is to say “associations oriented”.

The self-evaluation part of the voluntary experience is proposed as a way to summarise and give a synoptic statement of the different missions and competences acquired: in an association identified, a mission was fulfilled, a competence was acquired or developed with a certain level of competence. Four levels of competences are proposed: initiation (the first time I have experienced the skill), improvement (sometimes linked with a training followed), master (I perfectly know what to do and how to do it), and teaching level (I can transfer my skills to others).

In the part “training followed” of the portfolio, the volunteer must describe any kind of training understood in a wide sense: nature (classical training sessions but also any conference, meeting), content (knowledge received), length of time (days, half-days...), any certification obtained (most of the time this is delivered by external training bodies).

The part “Context of your voluntary work”: information on the association where the voluntary work has been done

Annex: any official paper written by the organisation concerning your role/function/mission in the association, leaflet of the association, contact in the association, any concrete action or result

2. synthesis of the experimentation among volunteers

→ Justifying a representative voluntary experience (in terms of time or work done)

→ Having a professional project : willing to come back on the labour market

Definition of the representativity :

- Being a volunteer for a representative length of time (number of hours)
- Having done concrete things: criteria to give, results obtained...

Thee public focussed: youngsters, women after having raised their children, unemployed people for a long time

The conditions shouldn't be too strict ; we can think of some kind of Gentleman's agreement between the volunteer and the association ; the time dedicated to the support of the volunteers should be given back by the volunteer

The profiles of the volunteers that have experimented the portfolio are different in the two regions :

- In Ile de France : women, middle-age, in national association, federation or national union willing to use this tool and method for their association or/and for personal purpose (they are working in the training field or are seeking job);
- In Champagne-Ardenne : men and women , middle-age and youngsters, in local association or federation in the Youth and Sport field .

Their main goals to experiment the portfolio was a way to value and recognise their voluntary experience. Some of them have already experienced a "portfolio of competences", compiling their professional experiences, when they were employment seekers. They have already integrated some of their voluntary experiences in their *curriculum vitae* but not in such a way, focussed on the competences developed or acquired.

Their reactions and proposals were of two kinds :

- on the form of the portfolio ;
- on the content of the portfolio.

Remarks made on the form:

- Format :18 pages ; a good format to be taken seriously in a professional perspective ; time to fill the questionnaire depends from one candidate to the other but it takes more than 2-3 hours if you really want to integrate the process and think about all the details ;
- Paper support + support to download : the paper support allows to see the kind of document to fulfil ; the electronic support allows to fill the different rubrics which require

the personal input of the volunteers ; moreover with the electronic support volunteers can keep all the information in their computer and add any new information or take only part of it.

Remarks made on the content:

- the volunteer shouldn't be left alone for reading the document ; the document needs to be explained ;
- the context is as important as the tool itself ; the process should be understood in a professional perspective ;
- the document in itself is considered as a form of learning and self-evaluation ;
 - ➔ First problem : identifying the different missions
 - ➔ Second problem : speaking the language of competences
 - ➔ Third problem : the self -evaluation ;
 - ➔ The training followed : depending on the mission fulfilled
 - ➔ The context : the environment of the voluntary work

The list of missions is a good basis but the volunteers should be free to add any information they would like. For certain volunteers, the list is quite useful as they wouldn't imagine all the work they have done with so many details. Other volunteers don't recognise the work they have done and prefer to express their volunteering in their own words but they don't see any objection to present things like this.

The typology of competences proposed helps to structure things and to speak the language of competence. This is quite new for the volunteers to speak such a language. They have well integrated that the perspective was professional; some of them suggested that the portfolio should be presented even to volunteers who are not job seekers to allow them to be accustomed to the process. The earlier you know the existence of such a tool, the better you can value your voluntary experience.

The four degrees proposed for the self-evaluation are not understandable at first glance; it needs to be explained. They are not understandable for people who are not familiar with training notions. The idea of a QMC (questions with multiple choices) was given as it is the easiest way to do your own self-evaluation. This is also a synoptic approach of the voluntary work: after having been through all the items (missions, different forms of competences...) the volunteer can value them. This is no more a description but an analysis of your voluntary work, a critical approach.

The training sessions followed seem to be the only « objective » data, easily findable for the volunteers. They haven't thought that training could be done in so many ways: colloquia, conference, seminars ... and not only in the classical way. This is a very interesting and valuable process as the volunteers must remind all the occasions they have had to learn something useful for the association an their voluntary work but also personally. There is of course a difference in quality: you can easily use a certificate delivered at the end of a training session when it has been done by a training body (an official one). It is less easy when the training has been followed internally.

The volunteer will take the initiative to ask for further information in the association. This is the research part of the portfolio. As in any autobiographic approach, it requires some time to find all the information concerning the characteristics of the association.

The documents to be joined to the portfolio can be of various natures: minutes of meeting (board, general assembly...), leaflet, flyer published on the occasion of special events...

3. synthesis of the experimentation among associations

The profiles of the associations were also quite different from one region to the other :

- in Ile de France : in the field of social services (help for married couple, parents with multiple births), leisure (national association for wives of soldiers) or integration in cities (a national union for Welcoming new comers in French cities) ; this is the main profile of the associations members of the Cicos which contacted them ;
- in Champagne Ardennes : a regional delegation for Youth, a local association, different departmental committees of sport federations (tennis, archery...), a regional delegation working with youngsters (sport and leisure) ; this is also the classical profile of associations working with the Regional Direction for Youth and Sports which contacted them.

Their main goal to experiment the portfolio was to use a tool and method for managing their voluntary human resources. It may exist for paid-staff but is not quite used as most of the time they don't have enough paid-staff. Recruitment and training of human resources are managed in short term and are not part of a strategy. They were quite enthusiastic to have the chance to experiment such a tool for their volunteers as recruitment is a key issue together with a long term strategy to keep them in their organisation.

Their reactions and proposals concerned both the portfolio and the leaflet.

Concerning the leaflet whose main goal was to explain the project, the following points have been developed:

- the context of the project : a general presentation of the project with the background ; the aims of the Leonardo da Vinci programme explaining the general spirit of the European programme ;
- the partners of the project : the name, profile and main interest in the project were asked by the associations ; this is an added value for the associations ;
- the presentation of portfolio for the volunteer (the main goal and results expected) ; the content and method used ;
- some useful definitions : volunteering, formal learning, human capital (on the basis of the Cedefop glossary) ;
- some useful contacts in France : main contacts in France in the volunteering field ; the associations and public authorities responsible for the voluntary sector.

Remarks on the form :

- ♦ format : 15 pages ; the project deserves to be explained in details as the notion of “assessing voluntary experience” needs to be understood step by step ; all the preliminary elements are most useful in this perspective ;
- ♦ paper support + reference to the website : all the information are still on the website of the project www.eEuropeassociations.net but without having been briefed the associations wouldn't have been on the website.

Remarks on the content :

- ♦ important to explain the origin of the project
- ♦ the portfolio deserves a detailed explanation
- ♦ The definitions help to understand the different concepts used
- ♦ The contacts help to obtain further information on volunteering

Concerning the general presentation of the project, the following remarks have been made:

- more value given when knowing that this is a European pilot –project ;
- important also to say that we are in the experimentation phases ;
- the volunteers shouldn't take for granted that they could use this with official institutions

Portfolio :

- it is important to detail the main goals, the steps to follow carefully, the results or perspectives for further developments of the process ;
- the association/trainers have an « obligation of means » as opposed to an « obligation of results » ;
- it is not compulsory neither for the volunteers nor for the association to propose such a process
- The main risk seen so far by associations is that the volunteers will use this tool and method in a professional perspective and so could leave them.

The associations are faced to the following problems:

- ♦ First problem : finding the appropriate persons to support the volunteers ;
- ♦ Second problem : which criteria to take into account for choosing the candidates ;
- ♦ Third problem: the financing of the process which requires at least 3 training days.

Information should be the first step of the process. A general presentation should be made on many occasions: the recruitment of new volunteers; the training sessions proposed to volunteers; a specific meeting explaining the process. The only risk should be that new comers would choose the association only for the Ave process; this is a famous phenomenon known in the public services as the “free rider” problem : there is always the risk that someone would benefit by a service without paying the price for it.

A selective step should follow: the association can evaluate the volunteers for whom it should be useful on both criteria: they have helped to develop the association; they need the portfolio in their research of work.

The support step: it should comprehend two phases. The first phase would be the training sessions with a group of selected volunteers; this should be the best way to use the tool and method. The second phase would be the personal interviews with each of the volunteers. A natural selection should have been made between the two phases to see the volunteers really motivated by the process.

The evaluation step: how many volunteers have gone to the end of the process? Did they really find the tool and method appropriate?

The feed-back: was the process useful on the labour market? How far could it be recognised by volunteers, associations, human resources?

4. synthesis of the experimentation among people responsible for human resources

The profiles in France of such human resources were:

- people working in the National employment agency (ANPE in France) ;
- people in charge of “assessing voluntary experience” for the services of the Ministry for Youth and Sports (in the region Champagne Ardenne in particular but also in Brittany) ; civil servants in charge of the associations (regional and departmental direction for youth, sports and associative life) ;
- people in charge of “assessing voluntary experience” for the National Association for Vocational training (AFPV in France) ;
- trainer/teacher at the National Conservatory for Arts and Trade (CNAM) who have been working on the subject of portfolio in France (as this is a tool imported from the United States of America and Canada) ;
- teacher at the University in charge of assessing formal, non formal or informal learning for anyone willing to postulate for a University diploma ;
- people in charge of “assessing voluntary experience” for the services of the Ministry for Youth and Sports (in the region Champagne Ardenne in particular but also in Brittany) ; civil servants in charge of the associations (regional and departmental direction for youth, sports and associative life).

Their reactions were:

- ◆ First reaction : existing initiatives to assess formal, informal and non formal experiences are not focussed on voluntary experience ;
- ◆ Second reaction : a good way to increase the knowledge on volunteering and its specificity outside the non profit sector
- ◆ Third reaction : the portfolio and leaflet proposed plus the method could usefully complete the existing tools and methods

The ways they could integrate/use our tool and method

- ➔ A tool for the volunteers to use their voluntary work outside the association in a professional perspective
- ➔ A tool for the association for managing their voluntary human resources
- ➔ A method for assessing voluntary work as a means to recognise volunteering by public partners but also on the labour market

The existing initiatives already proposed for assessing voluntary experiences, most of the time, don't comprehend the professional perspective; it is not put first and foremost (just presented as an option). For instance a file is proposed in Brittany since February 2005 ; the link with the labour market is one of the 4 options proposed: to make his/her own volunteer's autobiography; to make a statement at a given time to change from one association to another; to postulate for a training with an official diploma at the end; to identify and use the voluntary experience on the labour market. Tool or method proposed by some associative federations (in sport, solidarity...) are not focussed on the way back to the labour market ; they are more internal tools or tools to be used among associations to identify skills that may be useful in other associations.

In the official structures in charge of assessing formal experience (most of the time professional experience), workshops for unemployed people willing to assess any experience are proposed by ANPE and AFPA. A suggestion made was to join this portfolio for voluntary competences to the other existing tools and methods (which are quite numerous).

The main problem is to accompany the job seekers in the perspective of the AVE process. On the labour market, even if in the *curriculum vitae*, there is often a mention on volunteering, very few people are really able to clearly identify the skills, competences, abilities developed in the volunteering. The knowledge in the voluntary sector is not very developed. The professionals in charge of orienting the job seekers are not accustomed to this specific experience.

Another problem is to give an official recognition to the process. Only habilitated bodies such as the National Council for the Professional Certification can give its agreement to a certificate officially recognised. There are more than 15 000 such certificates in the data bank created in 2002 together with the adoption of the so-called "law for social modernisation" including 11 000 diplomas at the University.

Of course a voluntary experience could allow candidates to complete their experience or knowledge to gain part or the totality of one or more of those professional certificates. The work required to propose a list of certificates concerned by a voluntary experience could be a pilot-project in itself. Could it be appropriate to think of a specific certificate for voluntary work? It could concern mainly the general or transversal competences. Many training bodies specialised in the associations' field propose general programmes in order to develop these transversal competences. They could be interested by such a certificate, and so would be the volunteers (most of the time executive volunteers).

A linked question was how to finance the candidates for assessing their voluntary experience. There are funds for financing job seekers in their research: the problem is the specificity of a volunteering would be a little lost. There is always more value given to the professional experience. The problem of the quality or validity of the voluntary work, which is not paid, is often raised: volunteers are very versatile people by necessity as the association doesn't have the money to pay professionals. Would they accept to pay their volunteers, if they had the money for it, for providing the same service? This is always the same problem, even for associations when they want to value the voluntary work in their balance sheet: which price for which volunteer? This is the law of the demand and the offer but without price in the context of volunteering.

5. Main conclusions and proposals.

The portfolio proposed could be seen in three aspects:

- A tool for the volunteers: the AVE process must be considered at a given time, this is an on going process, the volunteer keeps what he/she wants and chooses the information to be delivered to the potential employer, education institution...
- A tool for the association : the main point of the device proposed is to incite the associations to be more professional in the missions proposed, the competences developed, the training offered ; it is a form of internal audit for them and so they can be clearer towards
- A method for assessing voluntary work outside the association: on the labour market, volunteering is not already recognised as there is a strong suspicion of incompetence as this is free work « something for nothing » ; the professional way to present a voluntary work following a standard will make a change

The main reactions were :

- ➔ The tool and method are welcome by volunteers, associations and people in charge of human resources ;
- ➔ The need for a training : the tool and method can't be used without a training and the labellisation is quite necessary to control the good use of them (to allow people to use in a professional perspective) ;
- ➔ The financing of the process : an opportunity with professional training bodies that could have some extra-funds to dedicate .

The main conclusion of the experimentation so far is that the volunteers should benefit by some information or training course as this is not that easy to fill the portfolio proposed :

- ➔ preliminary step : explaining the meaning and the spirit of a portfolio, and the specificity of this one, focussed on volunteering ;
- ➔ first step : a proposed list of missions fulfilled is not too difficult to understand ; the selection of 3-5 made by the volunteer to describe them in his/her own words is more difficult as there is the aspect of being meaningful in a professional perspective ;
- ➔ second step : the competencies acquired or developed (presented in 3 main categories, each time with a focus on 3 main competencies for the volunteer to explain) are the core of the portfolio ; this is the part that would require a training or at least an accompanying ;
- ➔ third step : the self-evaluation of the levels of competencies/skills acquired (4 levels proposed : initiation, improvement, master and teaching level) is also the difficult part but the most useful in a professional perspective ; with this critical approach, the volunteer can really say how far he/she can use a competence ;
- ➔ fourth step : training followed (nature, length, any certificate delivered...) : the easy part that requires to use one's memory ; the most "objective" part, the only point is to understand that the classical training sessions are not the only training to take into account ;
- ➔ fifth step : the environment of the volunteering (the characteristics of the association) ; any element proving the reality and quality of the voluntary work ; this is also the most personal part as no trainer is needed except maybe for the selection of the relevant documents.

The question remains upon the presentation and simplicity of the portfolio as it shouldn't be a barrier for the volunteers and associations.

Another point is the informal volunteering. Of course the portfolio is most appropriate for volunteering in association as this is the only way to give characteristics of the structure, the contact person (president, general secretary...). But it seems that there is a new trend towards "informal volunteering" that is to say in church, city halls, hospitals... If the institutions can easily be presented, the context of the volunteering is not so easy to define.

Many questions have been asked on the profile of the people who should be in charge of the portfolio. The partners should be, for each of their country, the beneficiaries of the property rights. What should be their criteria to say that other people can use their portfolio ?

- the condition *sine qua non* to use the device should be to have followed a training ; the main problem should be the accessibility of the portfolio ; we should think of a "soft" version accessible to all and a "hard" version accessible only to trainees ;
- for the "soft" version only information should be necessary ; this version could be bought at a price given (10 euros for instance) ;
- for the "hard" version, the training is required with a number of sessions given ; the experimentation has proved that 3 days could be a good basis for going through the process with some time (at least one week) between each of the sessions to let the volunteers find their way and do some personal research.

Other questions raised concerned the criteria for supporting volunteers:

- the main conditions are to justify by a representative experience in volunteering (to be defined) and to have a professional perspective (not so precise but a will to go back on the labour market) ;
- the time required in France for assessing informal or formal experience is three years with a certain volume of hours (corresponding to a part time job of 2 days a week) ; it shouldn't be so demanding for our portfolio ;
- some trainers and associations have suggested that this portfolio could be used also for new volunteers as this is a continuous process : the portfolio should be a tool for managing human resources for the associations and so integrates the recruitment part ;
- the deal between the volunteer and the association would be : you give us your time to develop the missions of the association ; we offer you time to go through the AVE process ;
- having a professional perspective shouldn't be another barrier : it is not compulsory to have a short term professional project ; the professional project should be defined together with the portfolio ;
- the volunteers should be aware that the Ave process is a tool and method developed under a pilot-project ; it is not yet an official tool and so they can't claim for any official or financial support yet ;
- the Ave process has created high expectation on the volunteers side ; it shouldn't create high frustration ; it can give value and a personal recognition of one's voluntary experience ; it can't give the right to any official certificate nor to a job in the association field.

The more the volunteers will use our portfolio, the better feed-back we could have and the better chance to be well known and recognised by other volunteers, associations and people working in the human resources field.

Many questions on the financing of the Ave process have been raised :

- Could it be taken in charge by the National agencies for employment or in any funds for training dedicated to unemployed people?
- Could it be taken in charge by the associations in their training programmes?

The questions remain open as this is still the experimentation step and the associations and volunteers didn't pay for having access to the device. As the Ministry for Youth, Sports and Associations and its directions have known and supported the project at least in 2 regions in France, it gives some argue for being financed. The general trend is less and less money on the State level so we can't be so optimistic on this side.

On the regional level, this device, associated to other device (oriented on professional experience) could be financed under the rubric "lifelong education and training" but we will have to be quite convincing.

On the local level, the city halls may be interested, as they are the first partner of the associations. We can find more and more Houses for associations (one per district in Paris for instance). Training is one of their budget lines. So we could be optimistic on this point.

On the local level, the agencies for employment could be also quite interested as an additional tool for their existing workshop "Assessing experience".

This experimentation step has been quite useful as this has been a way to be more concrete towards volunteers and associations. On the principle, they totally agreed upon the "recognition of volunteering" aspect ; they were much more sceptical on the ways and means to really recognise a voluntary experience. The proposal of portfolio seems to have convinced them.

On the human resources part, the ministry for youth, sport and associations (and its services), the national employment agency and the national training for vocational training seem to be quite open to new tools and methods.

The experimentation has been quite positive.