

AVE

Assessing voluntary experience

Pilot project in the framework of the programme
Leonardo da Vinci

Report on the experimentation

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Overview

The aim of the phase of experimentation was to design and test a tool to identify and assess competencies gained through volunteering in order to make this information fruitful for the volunteer's way (back) into a paid employment. Under the general framework of the project, it was agreed that the tool should be adapted to the respective national contexts.

At first we refer to the construction of the German version of the AVE tool. The first element to be mentioned is an extensive review of the volunteer biography which we think is necessary to raise and actualise competencies which might have been acquired in former steps of the volunteer commitment.

To explain the national context in Germany and thus the background of our experimentation, we then move on to what has been issued in the field of assessing competencies gained through voluntary activity especially in our empirical field, the voluntary associations in the German state of Hessen. We then draw our conclusion on what impact this background has on our national version of the AVE-tool. As there seems to be no directly parallel type of association in the other partner countries, we describe mother's centres as the type of association we did our experimentation in and where we plan to systematically employ the tool in the future.

For a future use of the tool both the role and dissemination channels of DPWV Hessen and the position of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in the region of Offenbach are crucial. The instrument to a certain extent has to meet the needs of both the DPWV as representative of a broad range of voluntary organisations and of the employers.

We then refer to the various steps of preparing and conducting the experimentation. Adding to the material provided by the AVE project, we shortly present and discuss some concepts for the categorisation of competencies which are currently on debate in Germany. The next question to be tackled is the question of levels of competency. We present our arguments in favour of a simple two-level self-evaluation of the level of competencies.

On this basis we describe the procedures and results of our experimentation both on the "sender" and the "receiver" side of the device, the volunteers preparing the portfolio and the personnel managers in enterprises, who will make use of the information displayed. We will refer to the preferences both volunteers and employers declared regarding contents and structure of the tool.

The experimentation of the portfolio

Before we started our experimentation in the field, we had to accomplish the following work steps:

- construction of a pre-designed set of competencies to be included in the tool
- development of a standardised guide for our interview practise
- triage of the questionnaire concerning volunteers in mother centres who are interested in co-operating
- formulation of a standardised letter for the purpose of a first information about the project

Biographical approach

Scope of the AVE project are “experienced” volunteers, who have volunteered long enough to allow for gaining competencies relevant for the professional sector. More than in the field of youth volunteering, adults (mothers after the childcare phase or unemployed) who aim at a re-integration into the labour market often are able to look back to a long volunteer biography.

For the purpose of applying for a job, it will be helpful to make the best possible use from one's volunteer biography. To guarantee this, we think it is necessary to go back to the very beginning of one's volunteering in a specific association and think about the activities performed then. We assume that a volunteer biography in most cases can be clearly separated into distinct phases. There might be a longer phase of being a normal volunteer without specific functions in the beginning or also in between, but at all other steps phases can be separated from each other by the functions that were taken by the volunteer.

Our idea was to let volunteers describe the phases of their volunteer biography, ask for the specific tasks and activities performed in each of the phases and derive the competencies thus gained directly from this.

Set of competencies to be included into the tool

Various inputs within the AVE project, especially the questionnaire and the range of sources provided for comparison already gave a broad basis for constructing a set of competencies to be included into the tool. For the German context – as for any other specific national context – we found it necessary to refer to concepts that are currently debated and/or in practical use already. When presenting the AVE-project in Germany, always one of the questions asked first was: “How does your project relate to the concept of ... [for example key competencies or soft skills”. To meet this demand we found it inevitable to embed the German tool into the ongoing debate in our country.

For a categorisation of competencies there are various models available ranging from rather basic to very elaborated systems. One option was to follow the Europe-wide disseminated and applied model of the Europass, which differentiates under the headline “personal skills and competencies” between six categories of competencies (language, social, organisational, technical, computer and artistic skills) followed by an open category to add anything else. The Europass model does not use pre-formulated sub-categories, but describes what the category is about and gives some examples how it might be completed. The Europass model is very much devoted to being short and concise “Concentrate on the essentials. A CV must be brief: in most cases, two pages are enough to show who and what you are. A three page CV may be considered too long in some countries, even if your work experience is outstanding”¹.

The joint initiative of the volunteering campaign of the state of Hessen² and various organisations under the lead of the umbrella organisation of youth associations in Hessen uses just four categories, again followed by an open category to add any other competencies. The categories are:³

- Project work (*Projektarbeit*)
- Ability to work in a team (*Teamfähigkeit*)
- Ability to communicate (*Kommunikationsfähigkeit*)
- Ability to organize one’s own work (*Selbstorganisation*)

For the purposes of the AVE project we judged that both approaches are under-structured and a more detailed approach would be adequate. Viewed from the perspective of voluntary work, in the Europass approach we especially found it difficult to distinct between organisational and social competencies: as voluntary organisation (at least in Germany) do not have elaborated formal structures, organisation primarily has to be done by using one’s social skills. In the approach currently used in Hessen we found it even harder to draw clear borderlines between the categories given.

Furthermore there is a broad ongoing debate in Germany about key competencies (*Schlüsselkompetenzen*). Of course we are aware of the fact that the concept of key competencies is not a German one, but an international debate⁴, but with regard to our experimentation we refer to the German adoptions of the concept and to the debate at national level.

In the OECD publication “Key Competencies for a Successful Life and Well-Functioning Society” three categories of key competencies are defined beyond the area of subject related competencies (*Fachkompetenzen*):

¹ Instructions for using the Europass curriculum vitae - <http://europass.cedefop.eu.int> - © European Communities 2003

² for further information in German language see www.gemeinsam-aktiv.de

³ for further information in German language see www.kompetenznachweis.de

⁴ see “Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society” OECD 2003

- interacting in socially heterogeneous groups;
- acting autonomously and
- using tools interactively.

The German adoption of the concept is less specific and distinguishes:

- Ability to employ methods (*Methodenkompetenz*) and comprises the following skills: learning strategies, the skills of using media, information retrieval, planning, project management, innovation management, teaching, counselling, researching
- Social competencies (*Sozialkompetenz*) comprises the following skills: transfer, teamwork, conflict management, moderation and facilitation, leadership, entrepreneurship, international orientation and multilinguality
- Finally self competencies (*Selbstkompetenz*) comprise self management, achievement orientation, flexibility, mobility, creativity, empathy and ethic behaviour.

Finally a concept often referred to it that of “soft skills”. In the German usually the English name is used. Especially in connection with informal learning and learning opportunities outside the professional world, “soft skills” are often quoted under the assumption that acquiring soft skills is what really can be done in volunteering, while subject related competencies play a minor role.

To document and measure soft skills, various sets of sub-categories are used. To make clear what the concept comprises, we display an example of the categorisation in English language below:

1. Oral/spoken communication skills: Both one-on-one and in groups (e.g., presentations).
2. Written communication skills: Both printed and online written work, including reports, letters and email.
3. Honesty: Being truthful and having integrity.
4. Teamwork/collaboration skills: Working with others to accomplish tasks.
5. Self-motivation/initiative: Doing things without needing to be told or persuaded.
6. Work ethic/dependability: Being thorough and accurate so colleagues can count on you.
7. Critical thinking: Challenging things when appropriate and proposing alternatives to consider.
8. Risk-taking skills: Taking a considered chance on something new, different or unknown.
9. Flexibility/adaptability: Going with the flow and adjusting with unforeseen circumstances.
10. Leadership skills: Guiding and supporting others in order to accomplish something.
11. Interpersonal skills: Relating with other people and communicating with them in everyday interactions.
12. Working under pressure: Handling the stress that accompanies deadlines and other limitations or constraints.
13. Questioning skills: Asking questions in order to learn or clarify something.

14. Creativity: Having the imagination to come up with new or off-the-beaten-path ideas
15. Influencing skills: Persuading others to think about or adopt a different point of view.
16. Research skills: Gathering information in order to study or answer questions. 17. Organization skills: Being organized and methodical, especially in work-related situations.
18. Problem-solving skills: Analyzing the potential causes of a problem and coming up with a solution.
19. Multicultural skills: Understanding and relating to people who are different from you, perhaps by using a second language.
20. Computer skills: Using basic word-processing, spreadsheet and presentation software as well as the Internet.
21. Academic/learning skills: Learning new things quickly and thoroughly, and being willing to learn continuously.
22. Detail orientation: Making sure that even the little things are done and done correctly.
23. Quantitative skills: Compiling and using numbers to study an issue or answer a question.
24. Teaching/training skills: Showing other people how to do something in a way that allows them to learn quickly and thoroughly.
25. Time management skills: Using your time wisely and consistently staying on schedule and meeting deadlines.

Some items from the above list like “honesty” and “creativity” make it necessary to think about the possible distinction of “competencies” and “talents”, because most people would think of these two examples more in the sense of “talents”. Taking into account that “talents” are primarily something that is given to a person (nonetheless they can be further developed in the course of life), while “competencies” are something that has to be acquired through training and/or practical experience, our conclusion is that “talents” are not an. To the extent talents are given to a person, they are not related to the volunteering experience, to the extent talents can be further developed, it is adequate to refer to this apart as to a competency.

Our conclusion from this review of concepts already in the field was that none of them can be fully adopted to the field of volunteering. Some use too few categories and thus leave too much work and thinking to the volunteers. In other concepts part of the subcategories are too sophisticated and specialized to make much sense in the voluntary sector. Furthermore in several cases we found the distinction between “hard” and “soft” skills or between subject related competencies and key competencies not convincing.

What we decided to adopt from these approaches for our own work was:

- To distinct between collection and display of information: both approaches advise users to display only those categories which are filled by the user. There is one format (a

questionnaire) where the entire information can be put in and there is another format (a CV, a portfolio) where either all or parts of the information are displayed to the organisation it is addressed to. In order to be brief, it is very well adequate to display only that part of information which might be relevant to a specific employer;

- To keep the system of categories open: if there is something relevant in the category “other competencies” that occurs quite frequently, a new defined category should be opened for future use. There is no need to keep the set of categories predefined and standardized;
- To get content information through an open comment from the user and to have an explaining text and furthermore some examples to show the user what the category refers to and how this open comment could look like.

Levels of competency

There is no doubt that it would be of great relevance to employers to learn from the portfolio, whether a volunteer’s competency in a certain field is basic, medium or master (or whatever other categorisation of levels of competency one could choose). The problem about working with levels in a self-evaluating tool is that there is no interpersonal scale by which levels of competency can be compared. Especially in the field of soft skills an assessment of levels of competency is hard to do.

But also in the area of “hard” skills it is difficult to assess levels of competency. We choose the simple example of “operating a spreadsheet calculation program” (like EXCEL) to explain our position: For someone who fully disposes of the features of such a program a certain level of competency might be called “basic”, while the same level of competency might be called “advanced” by someone who does not even know about the total set of features in such a programme. But compared to this, it is even much harder to define criteria, by which for example the competency of “conflict management” can be assessed by level.

Our first conclusion in the experimentation phase was to completely retain from asking for levels of competency, but leave it to the reader of the open text written to comment each competency to draw conclusions concerning the levels from what is said there. To allow for that, the volunteers using the tool must be reminded that the commenting text they write should allow to distinct levels.

In a second phase we took the wish of our interview partners into account to distinct between competencies in which they see themselves being advanced and such in which they see themselves being basic. Our tool now allows for such a distinction.

Preparing the German version of the tool

As we concentrated on the question [Which specific kind of competencies are acquired or enhanced in the field of voluntary work?] we decided to construct a pre-designed set of competencies, whereby the interviewees became faced with. While constructing this set, we referred to the responses of the questionnaire on the one hand and on the other hand to the definitions proposed by the CEDEFOP. Nevertheless we distinguished the competencies between “manifest” (e.g. accountancy) and “soft” (e.g. ability to work in a team) but decided not to emphasise this matter during the interview. One of our assumptions concerning this subject was that there is time and space to distinguish the competencies with hindsight if requested because we did not see a compulsory reason to act in another way for our interview practice.

As we tried to include all the important competencies to the highest degree, the set was developed and discussed in several sessions by the German AVE Team. But we also acted under the assumption, that the volunteers might add some competencies, which we did not consider. Therefore we also attached highest importance to the experimental stage.

In order to reach an extensive comparability and to ensure the sufficiency of the interviews, it was necessary to develop a standardised guide for our interview practice. This guideline was divided in two levels: biographic narration and the set of competencies. This dichotomy was generated against the background of our presumption, that reflecting the activities performed during the individual biography of volunteering could possibly ease the process of awareness. We aimed for a narrative way of telling of the own voluntary career, because we assumed that the interviewer might go into detail later on. Points of the first step of the guideline were:

- access to the field of voluntary work
- amount of time per week
- specification of the activities

The second part of the guideline contained the set of competencies, whereupon the interviewees were requested to give examples to each of the categories. We decided to process this way, because we worried about the possibility of just commenting the competencies as for they are valid.

Upon completing the preparation of the contents, we established contact with four women, who are involved with different mother centres. After they agreed to an interview, we sent a letter with the first information of the actual part of the project and the object of our appointment. We gained positive experience with this method of advanced information, as all of the interviewees showed up well prepared.

Conducting the interviews

Although it is clear that the tool to be prepared will be used in a written form, we conducted the experimentation by oral interviews in order to be very aware of

- difficulties to understand or handle certain questions or categories;
- competencies mentioned but not yet covered by our pre-defined set and
- the way our interview-partners were able to describe the soft skills acquired through volunteering in an informative way.

All interviews were taped. Besides the filled experimenting tool, a written summary was prepared on the basis of the tapes and the tapes were listened to by all members of the German team as a basis for discussion of necessary improvement of the tool.

Results on methodical level

Before the participant should concentrate on his/her competencies the instrument starts with a introduction of the aim of the project, which is the measurement of all those competencies which are enhanced or acquired during voluntary experience under a professional perspective. The volunteer will be asked to take his time to read through the instruction in order to give a complete impression of his/her abilities and to ensure that the competencies will be noted completely. At the beginning of the instrument he/she is furthermore requested to give particulars concerning the following matters:

- short biography
- activity and role of the volunteer in the organisation
- a complete overview of the competencies with examples
- further training, might be proved by a certificate or any document
- a stamp or document that proves the time span and experiences of the volunteer

The original idea was to adopt the instrument either in self-evaluation or in group-evaluation. This has been retained unchanged, but there are several considerations to attend. As we experienced during our field-work, it was much easier for the volunteers to fill in the categories by taking advantage of samples. This might be put into effect by an exemplary instrument or by samples in each case of a category. We decided to proceed in the second way, because this remains very close to our approach in the experimental stage. As already mentioned above, it is furthermore sufficient to acquire the main data of voluntary experience, which we realised at the beginning of the tool. Besides we left some space in addition, whereas the volunteers might add the competencies we did not register. We aim, that this tool finally includes all competencies the volunteers did enhance or acquire during their engagement in the voluntary field and moreover might be useful to

complete an integrated image of the personal abilities with regard to an application for an employment.

Organisational context in Hessen – Establishing a competency certification

There had been several tries to establish “voluntary activity certificates” (*Tätigkeitsnachweise im Ehrenamt*) in Germany, e.g. those of the church organisations, but with moderate success. In other words, there had been made little use of such a measurement and documentation, even though there have been lots of theoretical discussions on this subject (e.g. the recommendation of the Enquete Commission and the Youth-Ministry Conference). Besides the federal state of Baden-Württemberg, Hessen is that federal state, which supports voluntary commitment with all its facings on the highest degree. For instance, Hessen was the first federal state that realised the recommendations of the Youth-Ministry Conference of May 2004 by implementing a standardised voluntary certificate in the middle of November 2004 on federal level (q.v. www.kompetenznachweis.de).

Effects on the AVE-project

The development of Hessen is very meaningful concerning our procedures in the experimentation phase of the AVE-project in several ways: Therewith the Landesjugendring (umbrella organisation of all youth associations in Hessen) has arranged himself on his portfolio (short and including only few competencies) with complex and expensive support by the federal government.

Indeed we received the possibility to address all the youth organisations of Hessen by a mailing list of the Youth-Ring, but the return quote was very low (although the questionnaire had been downloaded several 100 times). Thus we could not count on further support, because the organisation understandably took care of the implementation for their own tool. This finally meant that the field of the youth organisations was not available for our experimentation and we had to reconsider those relevant groups of volunteers, which might be interested in our project due to a re-entry into the labour market.

Selecting the field of experimentation

Currently in Hessen there are approx. 60 self organised mother centres all over the state that offer different opportunities and services. They arose from the distress that in Germany public child care facilities are less developed than in the neighbour countries. Therefore the chance for women still being employed while raising a child is even worse. Thus in those centres mothers (fathers) and

children got the chance to meet each other for various activities. Kids are being attended when mothers organise their own activities or participate in courses for example. The constitution and the development of these mother centres had been strongly supported by the federal state of Hessen since the end of 2003, i.e. Hessen had sustained the "Hessische Mütterbüro" financially as an umbrella association. In this association we were happy to gain a competent contact person for our project on state level but unfortunately due to a cutting down of state expenses in the social policy field the financial support to this association was cancelled completely. So we were forced to contact each mother centre separately. Besides the Social Ministry of Hessen showed highest interest in the AVE-project but does not see any chance to offer practical support at the present stage.

We experienced highest interest on the part of the mother centres also for the reason that the rate of return was very high. Therefore we decided to aim at a co-operation with this kind of volunteer organisation and personally got in contact with four of them (sizeable and small) located in different areas.

On the occasion of the result that 84% of the respondents of the mother centres are interested in a method to assess voluntary experiences,⁵ we finally decided to focus on them. Furthermore, the demand of a high probability of a re-entry into the labour market was also fulfilled, whereas there should be also a personal use of the instrument for themselves.

The Role of the Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband and its Contribution to the AVE-project

Sybille Stallmann-Beseler is one of five regional directors of the Paritätische Wohlfahrtsverband in the state of Hessen and therefore responsible for the consulting and support of more than 100 organisations that focus on social services. Her engagement in this project is very important due to the fact that she is linked very closely to her colleagues of the Landesverband (state association) Hessen. Furthermore she stands for the circumstance that she and her team always try to discuss the topic of volunteering in a very qualified way. That includes also the fact that they offer further educations concerning volunteer management and try to convince the organisations of installing volunteer coordinators. Finally they constantly attempt to participate in the establishment of new volunteer centres.

The Experimentation among Volunteers

⁵ According to the result of question 25 of the German questionnaire.

After we accomplished the interviews with four volunteers, who are involved with mother centres, it turned out that the purpose of starting the interview with a narration of the past and present activities in the field of voluntary work was adequate. The consequence of recapitulation caused that the transfer to the set of competencies could be done much easier. But we have to point out that this effect could also be achieved by just asking for a biography of volunteering in a more general way (cp. the proposal of the tool in addition). The assumption that a similarly wide range of competencies could as be documented as well without going back to the biography and by just asking for certain activities and the competencies related to them had to be rejected already after the first interview.

In each interview we found out that the interviewees needed to get used to the self-reflexive confrontation with their own competencies, but they always were able to fill them with examples. Therefore we gather high importance in presetting the competencies, because this part of the method seems essential for the process of awareness. Furthermore the majority of women being interviewed declared that they had not seen their abilities from that angle yet. In consideration of the relevance of our pre-designed set of competencies it turned out that the presetting had been reduced as well as extended. "Manifest" competencies like foreign languages and teaching were less noted in return competencies like acquisition, negotiation or conceptual design had been added.

Below there are several comments of the volunteers concerning the dimension of the tool:

- "The tool should be offered as a self-evaluation method."
- "It should be short and understandable."
- "It is hard for me to rate my skills, please ask my colleague for that."
- "By reminding my actual volunteer CV it is easier for me to give a complete overview of my tasks."

The first impression of these statements indicate that our presumptions (and the presumptions of the chamber of industry on which we focus in the last chapter) have been served. Neither there was a high interest in a complex and over-formalised tool, nor do the organisations have the ability to apply a person who may take care of a guided evaluation. But this also emphasises the fact that the process of awareness concerning the actual CV is very important to be conscious of all the tasks fulfilled and competencies gained by the volunteers.

Another aspect refers to the experimentation among the volunteers relating to the content. As described in a more detailed way already, we decided to confront the volunteers with a set of competencies but we also followed the strategy that the volunteers might add any of them they

might have missed. The following statements of the volunteers being asked should clarify their attitude due to several competencies that have been pre-designed by our team.

- “Especially while *conducting* the board meeting it is necessary to ensure the schedule.”
- “Actually I am responsible for a re-occupation. Therefore knowledge in *personal responsibility* is very useful for me.”
- “I have to know about the new regulations concerning the mini-jobs. Especially about the *legal knowledge*.”
- “There are several subjects I have to decide on my own. Therefore I often need to remind me of my *independent* position.”
- “I am the main contact person in our organisation. Thus I need to be available more than 8 hours a day that sometimes demands a high *flexibility*.”

As for these statements only give a short overview of the wide band of competencies the volunteers have enhanced or acquired during their voluntary work, it however clarifies the importance of filling the categories with examples. In every single interview the volunteer was asked to exemplify her activity which first simplified the process of awareness and second lead to further competencies gained in her specific role in the specific organisation. Thus we decided to maintain the idea to let the volunteer give examples also in order to proof his/her engagement.

Another aspect refers to the difficulty of reflecting the soft skills. Competencies like independence, openness or tolerance had been commented diffidently. In general all the participants of the experimentation had been very open-minded to the tool, which found at least expression in the fact, that they provided their information willingly. We spoke with women, whose occupational background is linked to their voluntary work and with women, who do not have any pre-experience. In parts they work half-time again and in one case the voluntary work had been conductive for freelancing. By any means, all of them emphasized the importance of the possibility of documenting the competencies which they had acquired or enhanced, also due to their personal use in case of re-entering the labour market.

The Position of the Employers

To explore the position of the employers, we conducted an intensive interview with two representatives of the chamber of commerce and industry in Offenbach, the president and the head of the department for vocational training. These representatives can base their views not only on their personal experience, but also on discussions in working groups of managers, where the issue of volunteering had been risen.

The chamber of commerce and industry showed highest interest in the type of tool proposed in the AVE-project. A documentation and assessment of competencies acquired during voluntary experience concerning is judged to be a valuable add-on to the traditional professional CV. This refers to the fact that formal qualifications and skills as mentioned in professional certificates have lost part of their relevance, because they less and less meet the actual demands on the labour market.

Beforehand of specific competencies gained through voluntary activity many employers in Kreis Offenbach tend to positively assess the fact that a person is volunteering. On the average, volunteers are assumed to be socially well balanced personalities. This might have to do with the efforts made in the state of Hessen to build bridges between the private economy and the voluntary sector and thus be not representative for Germany in general.

Enterprises try to find new ways to find out whether the competencies and skills that actually count on the labour market are given or not. Features like teamwork, social behaviour, commitment, initiative and creativity are key issues in this context.

As far as the format of the tool is concerned, our interview partners doubted the use of an extended and time consuming format and strongly argued in favour of a short and clear one. They clearly not expect to find a quantitative and interpersonally comparable measure especially in the field of those "soft" skills they are most interested in. To employ a standardized evaluation pattern may cause the problem verifiability. This advice strengthened our intention to avoid a highly structured tool but to aim for a base which can be extended as regards special needs concerning the volunteer practise.