

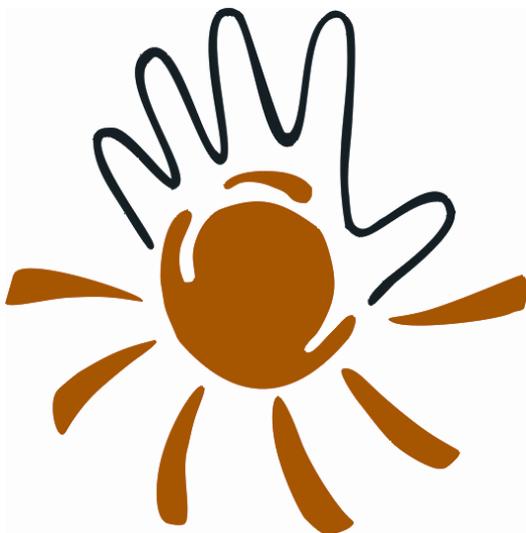
Assessing voluntary experience (AVE) in a professional perspective

**Leonardo da Vinci programme
(2003-2006)**

REPORT

Step 4: AVE Experimentation

POLAND
The Volunteer Centre



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AVE STEP 4 OBJECTIVES

The main AVE step 4 objective was to develop tools and methods – the final version of the volunteer portfolio as well as a practical guide to the portfolio for NGOs. Additionally, it was our intention to provide project information to volunteers and NGOs on the one hand and institutions associated with human resource development and labour market on the other.

At that stage of the project execution a preliminary version of the national portfolio had to be prepared and consulted with NGOs and labour market institutions.

The next step was to test the tool in practice. It was necessary to gather volunteers who would fill their own portfolio. The portfolio had to be assessed with respect to its clarity and applicability.

Finally, the portfolio had to be presented to the HR and market labour institutions that would in fact be its final users. In the portfolio development, we had to remember that the volunteer would present the document to potential employers. The objectives of the consultations were twofold: we wanted to inform about the project and show how the portfolio could be used by employers.

We have managed to accomplish all of the above-mentioned objectives in Poland. We have developed a draft portfolio, conducted consultations with NGOs and interviews with volunteers and contacted two institutions – one institution associated with volunteering in Poland and another associated with the labour market.

Step 4 timing: March – June 2005. Till the end of March the project of the portfolio was ready. For the next two months we have had several meetings and we have been discussing with the volunteers' coordinators from different NGOs and the institutions of labour market. Of course after those discussions we were improving our portfolio.

PORTFOLIO

The content of the portfolio (first version of the draft)

1. Information on the AVE project – AVE goals and objectives, participants in 7 countries. It makes an important part of the portfolio as the first communication on the project has a key role in convincing the volunteers to fill in and use the portfolio.
2. Information on the portfolio itself – what it is, what are the goals behind it, how it should be filled in and how to do it.
3. A section devoted to the volunteer – filled by himself/herself or with an assistance of the organisation s/he works for. Under each point the volunteer should write down appropriate information on his/her voluntary activity as well as skills and competences developed during the process.

a. The tasks performed by the volunteer in the organization

i. Examples:

- Office work, administration
- Organisation of events and special activities: festivals, conferences, etc.
- Personnel management, HR
- Accountancy
- Fundraising
- Training
- Consulting, advice offering (e.g. hotline service)
- Information sharing
- Communication and PR
- Direct assistance to people away from the office (e.g. child care, senior citizen care, support in doing homework)
- Programme coordination
- Physical work, cleaning, renovation
- Editor's work (text writing, leaflet edition)

- b. **Self-evaluation of the volunteer** - Volunteer have to evaluate their proficiency in doing the tasks in the specific field.
- i. Four levels of proficiency of volunteer activity:
 - Initial stage: first experiences in voluntary work, basic skills developed recently
 - Development stage: development of acquired competencies through training
 - Advanced stage (professional): theoretical knowledge and practical experience
 - Expert: teaching others
- c. **The analysis of the skills developed by the volunteer**
- i. **General skills** of social character, irrespective of the situational context
Examples of operational skills:
 - Official document writing
 - Budgeting – cost planning
 - Foreign language skills
 - Computer work, IT
 - Office equipment usage: fax, copy machine, Internet
 - Meeting management, public speeches
 - Interpersonal communication
 - External communication: contacts with other organisations or institutions, answering phone calls, e-mail writing
 - Organisational skills
 - Decision making
 - Adaptation to changing conditions, new situations
 - ii. **Specific skills**, developed through particular voluntary assignments
Examples of specific skills:
 - Know-how of the specific field in which the organisation operates

- Fundraising
- Knowledge of legal issues concerning the area of activity and the law on volunteering
- Relation between the volunteer and the employee
- Team management
- Event organisation (planning, management, evaluation)
- Negotiations, mediations
- Specific functions: leader, education assistant, animator, therapist
- Application writing
- Rehabilitation, therapy

iii. **Personal features** developed through voluntary activity

Examples

- Altruism
- Openness to others
- Social values
- Creativity, initiative
- Being a reliable and involved person
- Responsibility
- Ability to adapt to new conditions
- Self-confidence
- Feeling of safety

d. **Training attended** as a part of the voluntary engagement with the organisation. Volunteer have to list all trainings that they participated as a volunteer in the organisation. Include the following information:

- Subject
- Training duration
- Diploma, certificate

4. **The characteristics of the organisation** in which they work. In filling in this part volunteer should be assisted by the organisation.

- The area of organisation's activity. Please, choose from the following list:
 - Education
 - Culture, art
 - Welfare
 - Health care and health promotion
 - Ecology, nature preservation
 - Sport, tourism
 - International cooperation
 - Religion
 - Others (please, define)
- Date of establishment – year
- Scope of activity
 - Local
 - Regional
 - National
 - International
- Number of members
- Number of volunteers in the organisation
- Number of employees
- Annual budget

5. **Annex** – documents confirming volunteer's engagement

- Statement issued by the organisation
- Statute of the organisation, some information about the organisation
- Web site
- Contact person in the organisation

6. Contact with the Volunteer Centre in Warsaw

CONSULTATIONS

Having made the draft portfolio, we wanted to gather opinions of various organisations and institutions. Apart from informal discussions with coordinators of volunteers in different NGOs, we also talked to representatives of two institutions: The Department of Public Benefit – a governmental institution responsible for voluntary initiatives in Poland and The Centre of the Information and Career Planning – a governmental institution providing employment consultancy.

The discussions are described in the following summary.

The Department of Public Benefit

Katarzyna Kołodziej – coordinator

Voluntary activity

Main tasks: auxiliary work connected with projects, the support for organizations and the coordination of programmes; mainly community service, charitable activity, environmental protection, culture, art and health protection.

Voluntary experience in a prospect of future employment

As a rule, volunteers are young people, mainly students, who have not taken up any job yet. Voluntary activity is their chance to gain some experience. They have theoretical knowledge which can be put into practice in organizations. It is their first professional experience, they learn how to use different computer programmes, how to organize various events, for example: conferences and galas. They also acquire certain features of character, such as courage, interpersonal skills and familiarity with work. It can be said that there is an assumption that voluntary activity is to help everybody in his or her difficult life situation, for instance in the first contact with the labour market. Therefore, voluntary activity can become the first step in one's career.

Voluntary activity includes a possibility of checking what one is able to do, to understand what one really wants to do in the future as well as to develop his or her professional track.

Voluntary activity seems to be more often used as an entry into a CV, as an element of the first job; it is a form of the professional activity.

Young people seize everything that can help them to find a job. Voluntary activity is becoming to be perceived as a possibility of the professional development and a starting point for the career.

Employers about voluntary activity

Employers try to find something unique in the CV that can help distinguish the candidate. It depends on the employer which voluntary activities he or she finds an advantage or disadvantage – which also may happen. The employer should appreciate the fact that his or her employees devote themselves to some idea and they are active people.

Recommendation concerning voluntary work

The organization is responsible for issuing a certificate of voluntary work. It would be really useful if organizations issued a widened recommendation including a wider description of volunteer's activities, his or her abilities and features of character. In the future this recommendation would be helpful in the moment of starting a paid job. The employer would have a better image of a candidate.

Such a document would lead to misusing. However, a dishonest person always and everywhere is able to find something that he or she may exploit. We should not be afraid of a large number of people taking voluntary activities only in order to receive a recommendation. There is a crucial role for organizations – they are responsible for a reliable presentation of some volunteer's activities. Moreover, if one person takes voluntary activities with a motivation of receiving an entry into a CV, it does not change a fact that something useful has been done. Motives are not as important as results.

Voluntary activity of working people

Currently working people have not a chance to begin voluntary activity. First of all, there is a phenomenon of so called “rat race” in which, unfortunately, voluntary activity is treated as a time eater. People with so little spare time at disposal spend it on relaxation. At weekend they have not got enough energy to do anything for others. What is more, they must fulfil family duties. Postponing a maternal decision also is not rare. Secondly, the employer usually requires a total flexibility from his or her employees. Employees agree with this situation for

fear of losing a job. A life of the employee is limited to work and family life. This can lead to a vicious circle with no view on the surrounding world.

Volunteers training

Investing in volunteers depends on the amount of time they have been working. The longer, the more necessary are volunteers training, raising qualifications and next engaging in more and more serious tasks.

Trainings rather should be connected with fields of the organization activity as to enable a volunteer realizing the tasks of this organization in a more effective way.

Dangers of voluntary activity

Volunteers should be treated in the same way as the paid staff. However, it may happen that a volunteer will possess better qualifications than a worker. This situation can be perceived as a danger for workers.

Besides, volunteers are like planes – they appear and disappear. There is a large rotation of volunteers in organizations.

The Centre of the Information and Career Planning

Magdalena Mazurek – the main professional adviser and a psychologist

Voluntary experience in a prospect of the further profession

Even simple tasks which are done voluntary in institutions are valuable – for instance, they give a chance to be in touch with people, observe full-time employees' work, watch a process of preparing the projects and doing the tasks.

Volunteers gain different abilities in organisations. These abilities depend on an area of activity of the organisation – content-related knowledge.

For the unemployed there are a few important elements: certain regularity of duties; the fact that they must leave home, meet with people. There is a chance to maintain competences during a break in professional work.

Voluntary activity may be a way of leaving the long-lasting unemployment. It may be a way of professional mobilisation, too. Voluntary activity may also be an attempt at working in a new range and taking new responsibilities.

Employers about voluntary activity

The employer employing a new worker takes into consideration your previous experience and there is no difference if it is voluntary activity or professional work. The form of work is less important than showing concrete activities, for example the executed projects.

An advantage of voluntary activities is the fact that you can decide on your own what and where you want to do and plan your career independently at the same time increasing your competences.

Voluntary activity of working people

It is a problem for the employer, because it limits an employee's flexibility.

Voluntary activity is the most valuable for the unemployed who after some break would like to begin working again or for people who have got the theoretical preparation and seek for some practice.

Volunteers training

The rule of mutuality – a volunteer gives his or her time and effort and they also should have a possibility to receive something – for example, the training. Particularly, at the beginning in order to initiate a volunteer into work.

Trainings are precious, especially at the beginning of work.

There should be mainly specialized trainings in the field of the organization activity.

Dangers of voluntary activity

Too large expectations of the volunteers that after some time they will be employed full-time by the organization.

Recommendation concerning voluntary work

It would be an additional document which the employers probably would not like to read. It is enough to mention about voluntary experience in a CV.

A directive from above concerning a necessity of filling out such certificates would lead to abusing in gaining such a document.

CONSULTATION SUMMARY

Summarizing both institutions:

- They recognize the worth of voluntary work, especially as far as the labour market is concerned. The voluntary work gives the youth opportunity to gain some qualifications and experience, particularly for those young people who have problems with getting into labour market. Slowly voluntary work is starting to be seen as the chance of professional development and career.
- They are aware of the need of recognition, systematisation and standardisation the skills gain by volunteers.
- They think that voluntary work is quite attractive for people who are looking for a job. Information about voluntary work put in Curriculum Vitae is interesting for the employers and because of that the chance of getting the job is rising. The employers are looking for something attention-grabbing in CV - like voluntary work - that marked out the candidates.
- They reflect the important role of the volunteers' coordinators in organizations: they have to honestly confirm the work made by volunteer and the skills that he gains.

Generally speaking, the draft portfolio was positively received by the interviewed organisations and institutions. Everybody could see a need to systematise the experiences of volunteers. The portfolio is also supposed to be a precious tool that may facilitate volunteer's employment. No objections were made to the portfolio content.

We also tried to obtain some information from the Polish Human Resources Management Association. Unfortunately, due to a big event organised by them in May they did not have the time to talk to us. We sent the portfolio by e-mail and received a response saying in general that the idea seemed good and no objections could be made to it.

EXPERIMENTATION WITH VOLUNTEERS

We decided to assist several volunteers in filling the portfolio. We contacted three organisations that:

- Earlier have taken part in AVE
- Cooperate with more than 10 volunteers
- Provide training for their volunteers
- Give documents certifying volunteer's experience
- Were interested in the tools and method proposed in the AVE project

We sent to these organisations a brief questionnaire for volunteers. The questionnaire asked about basic volunteer's data:

- Age of the volunteer
- Education level
- Description of voluntary work
 - Time
 - Missions
 - Trainings

After collecting the questionnaires, we defined three volunteer target groups:

- Volunteers - students
- Volunteers – unemployed, looking for a job
- Volunteers – employed

Three volunteers from each of the three groups were invited for an interview. In total, 9 volunteers came to us and with their assistance we made 9 individual portfolios.

During the interviews no significant problems were noticed. Filling the portfolio was not difficult. The content of the portfolio was said to be clear and understandable.

The only problem was the fact that the volunteers did not understand the objective behind the process. They did like the portfolio, they were happy to see that the skills and experiences acquired during voluntary work can be systematised but were not convinced that the portfolio could really help them in finding a job. Generally speaking, they did not expect

the portfolio to have any direct impact or relation between the voluntary initiatives and employment. The volunteers do not perceive their voluntary involvement as a factor that may increase their qualifications or help them in finding a job.

The issue is connected with the general perception of voluntary activity in Poland. Such activities are mostly associated with kind-hearted attitudes and offering help to others. Only some Polish people would see volunteering as an opportunity to develop qualifications and acquire new skills and experiences. Every year we conduct a study in which we ask volunteers about their motivation. The results are presented in the following table¹:

REASONS TO BECOME INVOLVED IN A VOLUNTARY ACTIVITY	Percentage of volunteers in 2003	Percentage of volunteers in 2004
I think one should help others (this is my moral, religious or political belief)	83.0	89.4
I find pleasure in it / I find it interesting	70.6	76.1
I think that if I help others they will also help me	66.7	70.1
I want to acquire new skills and learn new things	49.2	54.6
I cannot say 'no'	53.9	52.4
My friends and family also do it	36.1	40.1
I have a debt to pay (somebody helped me in the past)	27.6	31.5

The table shows that more than 89% of volunteers are volunteers because they want to be helpful and only 54% of them see that voluntary work can be a chance of gaining new qualifications and skills.

¹ WOLONTRARIAT, FILANTROPIA I 1% - 2004 STUDY REPORTS – the Volunteer Centre Association and Klon/Jawor Association, full text: www.wolonariat.org.pl

SUMMARY

The AVE step 4 objectives have been fulfilled. We have made a draft portfolio and consulted it with different institutions. Obviously after the Rome meeting and the discussion with other countries, we have now some remarks and suggestions that require certain changes in the document. The changes are needed mostly in the section devoted to the skills acquired by the volunteer. We will also add a summary sheet. The Portfolio is the separate document that will be enclosed to this report.

Generally after the consultations with organizations and after interviews with volunteers we are aware of the need of this portfolio. Firstly because of the fact that in Poland we do not have such a tool that gathers skills and competences acquired by voluntary work. At the labour market we have many different documents – the evidence of work; many certificates, recommendations etc., but none of them shows substantial skills that were gain during performing task or projects. This is the point of portfolio.

What seems most needed now is to inform volunteers about two things – the transfer the outcome of voluntary work to the labour market and about the portfolio as the tool of gathering the information about acquired skills.

First of all the society should be made aware of the practical aspects of volunteering – the fact that in this way one may also learn something, acquire new competences and develop new skills that are very useful at the labour market. We have to show that even during the task that are perceived as a very far from labour market -like helping kids with the lessons or reading books to blind people- volunteer can acquire for example some interpersonal skills.

From the work we made at step 4 we can see divergence about voluntary work. The volunteers do not see the relation between voluntary work and professional employment. They do not notice that through the voluntary activity they can gain some new skills or just experience that can be useful at the labour market. However this relation is easy seen by the employers and the institutions of labour market – they know that voluntary work play important role in gaining skills, qualifications etc. What is more recently the schools are promoting civil posture connected with earning work experience. That is way the schools are introducing duty of being volunteer for the specific time during the school-year.

It seems that even though that the main reason of being volunteer is to help directly other people – children, disabled, seniors etc., volunteers more often start to take the tasks

that are closer to the enterprising labour market. More and more volunteers support non-governmental organizations at office-work like making data base, answering the mails etc. Volunteers are getting tasks that demand more independence. Volunteers accomplish some project; organize the events like picnics, concerts, congress or just competitions. The experience and skills that volunteers are acquiring are very useful at the labour market, although there is a lack of awareness of this fact among volunteers.

On the other hand, we should disseminate the information on the portfolio – a tool that may help systematise the competencies and skills developed by the volunteer. There is a need of promoting the portfolio among volunteers and organizations. The portfolio should be easy accessible for those who want to fill it in. What is more the volunteer's coordinators from organizations should stimulate their volunteers to have their own portfolios. Those coordinators have to confirm volunteers' trustworthiness by certificating the work made by particular volunteer.

In addition we should inform employers that the portfolio is trustworthy and honest tool that shows acquired skills. This is the work to do at Ave step 5.