

Project name

SHERPA

Submitting party
Purpose

VZW ACV INFORMATIEF
Development of a working model for learning mentors in the workplace and drafting, validating and classifying of a professional Learning Mentor qualification

Work organisation innovations, digitisation, and the economic restart that is coming in the wake of the corona crisis, resulting in numerous restructurings, all pose huge challenges to the labour market in terms of education and training.

In its *Be the Change* study, Agoria claimed that 4.5 million workers will need to hone their digital skills and competences in the near future and that by 2030, 310,000 workers and job-seekers will need retraining to ensure their long-term employment. The restart after the corona crisis will further increase the need for training and retraining due to transitions.

Currently there is a wide range of choices of training and training providers. However, there is a lack of awareness among employees wanting to attend training courses about the support instruments available. Furthermore, there is often reluctance to take the step to attend training courses.

It is a well-known fact that people with low and medium skills attend fewer training courses than highly-skilled people, and women attend fewer courses than men. The many explanations for this include a lack of knowledge about the instruments and a lack of motivation.

Awareness-raising and providing targeted information is therefore necessary. The shop floor is one of the most important places where people, especially low- and medium-skilled employees who are less likely to take a step towards finding information about training, can be addressed in a targeted way.

Encouraging these low- and medium-skilled people to explore the training courses and instruments available, with a view to lifelong learning, is the number one societal challenge for the future and the challenge we want to respond to with this project.

In order to tackle this societal challenge, it seems necessary, useful and meaningful to deploy the figure of a "learning mentor" in the workplace.

In the same way that sherpas guide people so they avoid taking the wrong route, "learning sherpas", "training pilots" or "learning mentors" can provide useful guidance to employees. In other countries (the UK, Germany, Scandinavian countries), experiments with such learning mentors in the workplace have proved that this model works.

This should come as no surprise. The human, coaching approach of a mentor is important in providing psycho-social support. Learning mentors can provide outreach, and they are an accessible point of contact, as they work alongside employees in the workplace. They have a bond of trust, know the skills and context of the company and can therefore better assess learning needs and learning gaps and help articulate them. They also speak the language of the shop floor.

This project is aimed at developing a vocational qualification as a Flemish and European partnership (see below) and to have it validated and classified for a learning mentor. Once

these mentors have been trained, we intend to experiment with deploying them in the workplace.

After all, a recent Monitoring Report for Flanders (Support Centre for Employment, June 2020) shows that:

- Almost 60% of Flemish people have participated or are willing to participate in training, which is in line with the EU-28 average, which means that 42% of Flemish people have not participated in and are not willing to follow a training course. This group is larger in the Flemish region than in leading European countries.
- More than half of them (58%) are not willing to follow any training because they say that they do not need to. This means that "no need for training" is the biggest reason why people do not participate in training and this is the most persistent barrier to lifelong learning. This group is over-represented among the low-skilled and over-55s, while it is precisely those groups who are most vulnerable on the labour market if they do not retrain in good time.

In addition to participation in training, not everyone has equal access to information and support in the choice of training. Only four in ten (38.8%) 25-64 year olds have received free information or support on formal and non-formal learning in the last twelve months. This information and/or support mainly comes from the training providers themselves. The low-skilled, over-55s and those not in employment have less access to information or support regarding following a training course.

Taking into account the data on participation and willingness to follow training courses, the Flemish Social Partners have, in various agreements and policy recommendations, stressed: *"the need to promote learning incentives and measures and learning opportunities to ensure everyone is aware of their learning gaps and everyone can express their learning needs. This can be done, for example, **through learning coaches in the workplace**; awareness-raising campaigns about learning opportunities, learning incentives and measures; vouchers for career guidance; making existing and missing skills visible; and mapping out the degree of transition or changes in jobs".*

As ACV-CSC, we already launched the idea of "training pilots" at several previous conferences (2009/2013), and assigned them the following tasks:

Tasks for training pilots

"Training pilots are learning mentors in the workplace who inform and advise people on their rights and obligations in terms of training, education and career guidance.

They will guide, support and encourage workers to participate in vocational training and will be their guide for individual career and training questions. As an intermediary between employees, the employer and third parties such as training and education institutions, they will encourage employees to become aware of their individual career interests and the need to develop professionally according to their own needs and ideas.

They will make the various training opportunities and tools (e.g. career guidance, training credit, training vouchers, Flemish Training Leave, etc.) more visible, to ensure employees can find answers to the various challenges they face in their careers.

Training pilots are also a trusted person, who can inform employees and jobseekers about all training possibilities after compulsory education. They will create transparency about the training opportunities available in adult education, higher education, in the Competence Centres of the Flemish Employment Service (VDAB) or at the Flemish Agency for Entrepreneurial Training (Syntra). They will also provide information about the possibilities of successfully completing training courses through study guidance/counselling."

The role of a learning coach, training pilot or **learning mentor**, which is the term we will use henceforth in this proposal, is to bridge the gap between the need for training and the supply of training and to respond to employees' motivation for taking training courses.

The choice for the model of a learning mentor was prompted by the following considerations:

- Psychosocial support: In addition to a lack of knowledge, psychological thresholds (motivation, resistance, fear of failure, negative experiences, etc.) play a major role for these target groups. That is why it is important to remedy this aspect in particular. This can be done through the **human/coaching approach** of learning mentors.
- Outreach: These target groups are difficult for policymakers to reach. Learning mentors can do **outreach** because they are embedded at the micro level, in the workplace, and work among the people who are in these target groups. As a person, this makes them a very **(informal and) approachable** point of contact compared to other external and more formal channels in terms of motivating and raising awareness.
- Trusted role + neutral information provider: learning mentors are trusted colleagues who know the business and industry context, and the skills (or lack thereof) of the employees. This makes them perfectly placed to put all the **pieces of the puzzle together** and, on that basis, to provide **objective** and **neutral** information (in the interest of the working person) and to guide them, depending on their learning gaps/learning needs. They are better able to put all of this into words, as they speak the language of the shop floor.

Behavioural psychology provides 7 levers that learning mentors can use to try and motivate people to take training courses (source: PowerPoint from SERV's recommendations on Lifelong Learning, 2020).

- **Enlighten:** How can you better inform and enlighten your target group? What (factual) knowledge do they need?
- **Enthuse:** How can you emotionally involve and enthuse your target group? How do you create empathy? What expectations and realistic prospects for actions do you offer?
- **Encourage:** How do you encourage your target group to redistribute their resources (time, space, money, etc.)? What incentives can you use to encourage, reward, and give a boost to your target group to break them out of their old habits and work on desired behaviour?
- **Exemplify:** Which good, practical examples can you use to inspire your target group and provide them with (tailored) insights into how they can make changes in concrete terms? Are you yourself setting a good example?
- **Enable:** What resources, instruments, people, training, etc. are needed to enable and support your target groups?

- **Engage:** What ambassadors inspire your target group? How do you involve these role models? What space do you give them to convince others?
- **Experience:** How do you ensure that the test behaviour is a positive experience (from an emotional, sensory, intellectual, social, etc. point of view)? How do you provide positive feedback to your target group so as to reinforce their test behaviour and increase their self-confidence?

Our project wants to use these 7 levers as a source of inspiration:

- (1) to develop a professional qualification for a learning mentor, and to have it validated and classified within the Flemish Qualifications Structure;
- (2) to provide qualifying training and train both employee representatives and employees as learning mentors;
- (3) and to then introduce the model of "learning mentors", similar to the UK concept of "learning mentors/ reps" (see below), on the shop floors of large and small companies and evaluate its potential impact and institutional embedding within our current model of industrial relations in the workplace.

As ACV-CSC, following the aforementioned conferences we participated in a European Leonardo project on the assignments and role of learning mentors. This project brought together pilots on learning mentors from **Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Switzerland and Portugal** in a learning network. The final outcome of this project was a manual for learning mentors.

One of the major pilots within this Leonardo project was the UK model with trade union reps on the shop floor, initiated by Unionlearn. This TUC initiative has already trained 40,000 "learning representatives" at the behest of the UK government. Annually, they provide support to 250,000 mostly low-skilled workers in their training. In addition to a manual, Unionlearn also published a code of conduct for union reps in the workplace.

Intended European project partnership Intended composition and activities in the preparatory phase

In this 4-month "preparatory" phase for this ESF project, we aim to explore the possibilities of re-establishing a European partnership through desk research, with "ACV Informatief" being the promoter, applicant and hub for the project.

The Leonardo partnership worked very well and is therefore a good starting point for a new partnership.

We want to strengthen the ties and continue to learn from how other countries got started with the idea/figure of a learning mentor. After all, their experiences since the end of the Leonardo project can be enriching and instructive. They are also a good sounding board for drawing up, evaluating and refining a possible professional qualification profile.

We would like to test the cooperation and content refinements after desk research and via one or more short webinars in the September-December period.

This project was realized with the support of the European Social Fund. OP ESF Flanders 2014 - 2020. Priority from OP: 5 - Innovation and Transnationality.

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