

CASE STUDY

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“Using Communication
and Facilitation Skills
to Deal with
Daily Issues at Work”

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Introduction

José works as a job counselor at an agency for local development. His daily work consists of consulting the unemployed in different professional and social sectors by creating a profile in the agency's database for them and assessing their work and training possibilities.

Due to the current situation of unemployment in Europe, the number of people each day, who make use of this service by contacting the development agency where José

works, has recently increased. This increase in demand has resulted in a considerable reduction in the time a professional consultant can dedicate to each client, reaching the point where the counselors cannot offer a valuable assessment and the clients themselves start to evaluate the received attention as poor and unbeneficial.

Local Development Agency

The centre where José works is an agency for local development. It is a public entity that has a municipal order whose purpose it is to boost the productive fabric of the town by promoting employment and self-employment. This entity performs different activities within their field, but in the view of the general public, the most important work being done in the local development agency, is the advice and guidance to jobseekers. Being a public entity, this service is free for clients.

The agency caters to anyone who requests it (whether in the municipality where it is located or not) by appointment. The client is greeted by a job counsellor who analyses their professional profile. The local development agency possesses a job vacancy database in which the client is added. The information in this database is shared with companies seeking candidates to fill a vacancy. In addition, the agency's client also receives advice on how to

write a CV, is offered a directory of entities where they can submit their application and provided with information on employment programmes, scholarships, current openings, and other options that may be of interest.

In addition to this direct consultation for jobseekers, the local development agency also organises training courses online and onsite, forms part of a network with companies and training centres to establish collaboration agreements, advises entrepreneurs, has an information point in Europe and participates in other initiatives organised by institutions such as universities and the council itself.

In the local development agency, José works with two fellow counsellors but none of them devote their time exclusively to working in career guidance for clients of the centre but must divide it between tasks like tutoring courses, workshops, etc.

Difficulties and Challenges

The protocol followed in the local development agency with clients who come to use the services offered (during the first visit, more time is required to analyse the professional profile of the person) is clearly defined, which makes it easy for the staff and, at the same time, more comfortable for the clients themselves. People who come for the first time can make an appointment, either by phone or at the centre. This helps the job counsellors to organise their work day, so clients do not have to wait in long lines for their turn.

So far, this system had worked perfectly but in recent weeks there has been a significant increase in people who are requesting a session with the counsellors and the waiting list grew considerably. People seeking an appointment began to be subjected to waiting periods of up to three to four weeks. This situation was not acceptable because the waiting time limit, set by the development agency for clients to receive an appointment, is seven working days. To address this situation, it was decided to start admitting more people each day. The staff thought that with a small effort made by all employees, and taking into account that the process undertaken with jobseekers had already been perfectly established, they could continue to offer the best service to each person but using less time. This solution made it possible to get back to the parameters that the agency had set up in regards to clients receiving an appointment within a maximum of seven working days; however, this was no miracle solution because, from the start, it caused a series of other problems. The clients' complaints were immediate. First, people had

to wait around until they were attended to. In addition to being a great inconvenience to clients, it had also caused an excessive influx of people in the building and created a hostile and stressful atmosphere. Second, once clients were with the counsellor, they did not receive a good service, and were released in a hurry, with many brochures in hand but not knowing what steps to take to change their situation of unemployment.

José, along with his colleagues, began to feel pressure. They had to deal with the demands of the people in charge of the agency for local development, and complaints from the clients. They knew they were not providing optimal service to each person in front of them because they had in mind that there were many more waiting outside for their turn. They began to hear direct complaints from clients about the time they had to wait before they were finally being seen to, and many of them thought they had come for nothing.

To address complaints from clients, José used the communication technique 'fog bank' with which he managed to avoid direct confrontation with the person, not denying the criticism, but listening without interrupting, staying relaxed and accepting his share of responsibility without justifying himself.

Obviously, the situation could not continue and José and his colleagues demanded an effective solution from their superiors.

Proposed Solutions

The job counsellors organised to meet with the head of the local development agency to explain the situation in detail to him, from the perspective of the counsellors, as well as from the perspectives of the clients and the development agency itself, which has had its viability as well as the usefulness and competence of its services questioned. However, they did not want to come to the meeting only to explain the problems and demand solutions, but they thought it would be appropriate to suggest a solution.

They believed that the most obvious measure that could be taken to tackle the problem without creating new ones, was to hire one or more job counsellors. However, they employees knew it would not be easy to convince the head of the agency to agree to this request. As a public body recruitment is a strictly regulated process and conducted by the city council, never directly by the local development agency itself.

However the employees still requested a meeting with the head of the local development agency with the intention of presenting their solution, because he was also suffering the same consequences caused by the current situation, and they believed that this would be a good opportunity for him to listen to their proposals to find a solution.

The three agency job counsellors attended the meeting with the head of the agency to discuss the situation that confronted them, as well as the local development agency itself. Despite the fact that the head of the agency knew the problems that had resulted, the employee still decided to start the meeting by presenting the situation in form of a survey. Although the head of the agency did not deal directly with clients, he was also suffering the consequences of the current problems and the job counsellors believed that if they explained the situation that they must face daily, it could make him empathise with them and show a greater willingness to seek a solution. At the same time, raising the issue would allow them to gauge his reaction (non-verbal communication) and evaluate his performance as a negotiator.

Thus, José, on behalf of all job counsellors at the agency who accompanied him, explained to the head of the agency that the measures they had taken to reduce the waiting lists had brought about a number of very serious problems, such as loss of service quality, decreased client satisfaction and the decline of the working environment in the centre due to the crowds and pressure.

After explaining the situation, they noticed that the head of the agency was nodding his head indicating that he understood the situation and encouraging them to continue talking. The job counsellors stated that they thought the best solution would be hiring at least one more staff member that could absorb some of the workload, through which they could continue to keep a waiting list within acceptable limits, and return to devoting the necessary time to their clients and providing an adequate service. This would also eliminate the crowding in the centre and the pressure that it caused.

While outlining their proposal, they could see in his reaction that he was actively listening, but they also perceived certain signs of nonverbal communication that made them think that he was not in agreement with the solution proposed, such as the removal of eye contact and the absence of any consent which he had previously shown

when they described the problem. And this was confirmed when it was his turn to speak.

He bluntly stated outright that they could not take this action because the municipality had made it clear that the budget for that year was set and had already been allocated to the appropriate items/resources.

The group of employees knew from the outset that it would be difficult to get the proposal passed but they still decided to present it, so their position would remain clear and because, it was the best solution to their current situation. However, they knew that they would have to push a little and that to negotiate, you should start with your the ideal solution or your maximum demand as you will most likely have to reduce it in the course of the negotiation to reach an agreement. Therefore, as they had expected to have their request for hiring extra job counsellors refused, they dropped a notch in their level of demands and proposed the solution of hiring one or two college students as interns who were pursuing careers related to job counselling, such as management and business administration, psychology, labour relations, social work, etc. They would not have the same autonomy as a job counsellor but they would work under the direct supervision of one, because their primary role in the local development agency would be to learn. However, the interns could perform some of the work. This measure would help support the service and, as well as contribute to the training of young students who would gain valuable work experience, which in turn, could help them achieve future employment. On the economic side, it would certainly cost much less than what would be required to hire one or more staff members.

The head of the agency, seeming quite reflective, took time to evaluate this proposal. Then he said it was a good idea but it could not be implemented immediately. First, he would need to make an agreement with different universities or training centres from which the interns would be recruited. This process would require some time because organisations like these have processes to follow to approve such proposals. Also, he insisted that the budget of the local development agency for this year was closed and it would not be possible to make any changes, however small. So, although he highly appreciated the proposal of incorporating students, he could not implement it until next year but, until then, the agency would begin to take the steps necessary to delve into an internship programme. Since the problem still persisted, the head of the agency

also had to make a proposal. He suggested that the job counsellors could work with groups of four or five jobseekers at the same time. That way, the working time would be much more cost-efficient and, on the other hand, the service would be unburdened.

The job counsellors were skeptical of this approach but facing the problems they had in the job centre at that time, they decided to accept the proposal and arrange some group sessions as a pilot project.

Group Orientation

José succeeded in forming a group composed of four unemployed people who agreed to being involved in a group session. José wanted the group to be heterogeneous because, this way, participants could learn more from each other. The group he began working with consisted of the following four people.

Inés graduated in teaching five years ago. Following this she decided to apply for teaching positions, and despite getting two interviews she was not successful. For the last number of years, she has worked as a support teacher giving private lessons to two elementary school children but the prospect of no vacancies for teachers in the near future, has made her rethink her career and look for other alternatives. Alberto has a degree in labour relations. His father owns a hardware store where he helped out a few hours a week as a college student. After searching unsuccessfully for a few months to find work in fields related to career counselling, he feels he has to accept his family's offer to go work full time in his father's business. However, this idea discourages him a lot and he does not want to do it without exploring other possibilities.

Raúl is an electronics technician and wants to open his own shop for car radios, but first he wants to get a job working for someone else to save enough money to start his own business and, at the same time, gain practical skills in a related field.

Carmen trained as a clerk and was working in this position for three years before marrying. Then, she decided to devote herself exclusively to her family. But 15 years later, due to her financial situation, she has returned to the job market and was aware of the need to catch up on the necessary knowledge to do this job and was deliberating about whether to find another type of job, such as a salesperson, real estate agent, etc.

All of them had come to the local development agency once before, so they were already entered in the centre's database. José wanted to learn about the experiences they had (if they had had a job interview, further training...) since they were last at the agency and help them improve their job search.

At the beginning, José explained how the session was designed and how long it would take. First, because the participants did not know each other yet, he suggested that everyone gave a short presentation of themselves explaining what kind of training and experience they have had, what kind of job they were seeking and how they performed their job search. This first activity of the session served several purposes. On one hand, it enables them to get to know each other and thus, helped to reduce any tension in the room. On the other hand, it made them give an oral presentation of information that could be asked in interviews. Furthermore, it serves as an exercise in public speaking and encourages active listening of the clients and the job counsellor. In addition, José wanted the activities performed during the group session to be consistent with the demands and needs of the clients. He did not preplan all the activities of the session in advance as they may not respond to the interests of the clients. José encouraged Inés to be the first to share her situation.

Inés said that a month ago she had a job interview to fill a vacancy as home tutor. The company recruited teachers from different fields (English, Maths, History...) and different educational levels (elementary, middle, high school) to provide the service requested by customers in their homes. For this reason, having a driver's license and one's own vehicle were necessary requirements for the job. Inés did not have these and therefore was not selected to fill that position, despite having adequate training and work experience.

José decided to use Inés's case to explain an extremely important aspect with regards to job interviews and the unsolicited submission of applications, through a small exercise that consisted of presenting situations or facts in a positive way that could be considered a negative feature when trying to get employed.

José explained briefly how to do the activity. He explained that they would do it all together, in groups orally for 10 to 15 minutes. The counsellor simply details a characteristic or circumstance that may reduce one's chances of getting a job and the participants should then rephrase it pointing out the positive connotations of it. Thus, José mentioned "not having experience", "too young for the job", "too old for the job", "married and with children", "many job changes", and the particular phrase itself, that had led to this activity, "not owning a vehicle." The group members participated by giving their ideas of positive connotations that these situations could have in relation to possible jobs. José explained to them that everyone can have some characteristic or live in a personal situation that is not ideal for a certain job and that, if in an interview an employer asks about such circumstances or characteristics, they should emphasise the positive points of them.

After completing this activity, José asked Alberto to continue by explaining his current situation. He said that, although the work at the family's hardware store was not satisfying and he would like to change, he has gotten used to it and has spent increasingly less time looking for other work and training possibilities. Moreover, his family was very happy with the work he was doing in the business and, if the time came to tell them that he would stop working in the hardware store in order to do something else, he said it would be difficult for him as he feared it would result in conflict. José felt that, in his case, two things had to be taken into account separately. On one hand, staying active in his job search and, on the other, coping with his family's situation.

Regarding the first issue, José said he understood how one can get comfortable and stop searching for and monitoring job vacancies and training opportunities as they arise. Although Alberto's situation was different from the rest of the group, since he had a job, the truth is that everyone can become apathetic, especially when they are unemployed long-term. Therefore, the recommendations made to address this situation could serve all of them. One possible solution to avoid falling into a situation of

disinterest and passivity within one's job search is 'the agenda'. Simply put, it is about organising and planning one's job search. Start by specifying a regular time, in Alberto's case this could be one day a week of systematically searching for employment and training opportunities. So, on this chosen day of the week, he should perform the same pre-established routine: for example, consulting online job portals, searching for companies where he could submit his unsolicited application, and checking the news (scholarships, courses...) of the job centre of the department where he studied. Then, he should write down all vacancies to be targeted on his agenda, as well as all the things that would be of interest. He should also include a plan of how to proceed with them (for example, if he has found a company to submit his Curriculum Vitae to, he must organise when to do so; if he has seen an advertisement for a course of interest, he must plan when he is going to submit his application and prepare the necessary documentation, etc.).

Regarding the second question, José took the opportunity to talk about assertion. He explained that assertion is an attitude that allows people to act on their own interests, standing firm without experiencing anxiety and expressing one's rights without denying the rights of others. An assertive person communicates in an open, direct, honest and appropriate way. He/She has a clear idea of what they want and try to get it. José stresses the fact that it is very important to develop assertive attitudes in all areas of one's life, but especially with regards to labour issues. And, in Alberto's case, he needs to face his situation with an assertive attitude. José recommended to him that he should begin putting this attitude into practice right away and not to wait to find an opportunity to tell his family that he would not continue working in his father's store. He encouraged him to be honest with his family from this moment on by letting them know that he wished to work in something related to his training.

José went through some strategies to make assertive responses more effective:

- › Have a positive and realistic concept of yourself.
- › Plan the conversation: know what to say and how, what to answer to and what you want to inform the person about. Know the content and purpose of your message.
- › Be polite, take into consideration the point of view of others.
- › Do not resort to threats; if you use threats, credibility and cooperation, which are required, disappear.
- › Accept defeat when necessary, assertion entails recognising and taking responsibility for mistakes.

Then, Raúl explained his situation to the other members of the group. He said that he would like to open his own car radio business, but before starting his own business he would like to learn how other professionals work to gain practical experience. In the meantime, Raúl dedicates his time to learning the steps he must take to start his business, searching for an adequate location and other related information. At this point, Alberto asked for the chance to intervene. He explained to Raúl that he personally knew a shop owner in his neighbourhood. It was not of the exact same business he wished to set up but it undertook work Raúl wanted experience in. He said that, at the moment, they did not need to hire an extra employee but if his main interest was to find out how they worked, they might offer to hire him part-time, although the salary would not be very good; and if that was not possible, he could always go there to ask any questions regarding the administrative side of a business or other aspects of interest. He gave him the contact details of the respective person and told him that he would contact the person first himself.

José let Raúl and Alberto exchange information and, once they had finished, he involved the others in what had happened. He explained that what had just happened is called 'networking', which means an engaging with your network of contacts that can have a positive influence on your professional life, including your job search. A lot of people find jobs through direct or indirect personal contacts.

Many employers prefer to hire people already known to them or recommended by a staff member of the company. Therefore, it is very important to strengthen social contacts and relationships and you should also create a list of potential contacts who may be able to assist you professionally in some way. He emphasised how important it is for them to be locatable and available in order to make it easier for others to find and contact them.

Finally, Carmen presented her case. She said that, so far, nobody had invited her for a job interview but that she was invited for one during the following week to fill the position of a salesperson in a mall. She said she felt unprepared as she was untrained for this position. She had come to the session with the counsellor, particularly so the counsellor could instruct her and give her some guidelines for dealing with this situation.

Taking advantage of the presence of other jobseekers in the session, José suggested a role play to respond to Carmen's request. He suggested that they role play an interview situation, where Carmen was the candidate for the position and asked Inés to play the role of the interviewer, since she herself had had an interview recently. Along with José the other two members of the group would act as the observers and, at the end, they would state their observations to give Carmen some feedback regarding her performance.

Following this, José closed the session by concluding and reviewing the issues that were discussed and asked if they had any further questions or if anyone wanted to make any final comments. Since none of them wanted to add anything else, José asked them to give a brief evaluation of the session they just had, stating their opinion and, particularly, whether they found it useful, if they felt comfortable/uncomfortable talking about their personal situation in front of other clients and if they would be willing to engage in a session like that again or would they prefer individual attention.

The four members participating in this session stated that the session had been productive and that they had found answers and solutions. All of them were willing to repeat a session like that again.

Conclusions

After the group session, José reflected on how he had conducted the session and reviewed all the events that had occurred in the local development agency in recent weeks and that had led him to this situation.

The agreement reached by the job counsellors with the person responsible for the agency for local development was that they would hold group sessions on a trial basis for one month. Within this time frame, it was felt that they should be able to decide whether this approach allowed for the provision of a quality career counselling service.

WHO STANDS BEHIND GUIDE?

GUIDE was realized by MetropolisNet and its network. This network is made up of organisations working in metropolitan areas to promote social inclusion, employment and urban development.

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