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# Reflection as Support for Career Adaptability: A Concept for Reflective Learning in Public Administration

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**Abstract.** Reflective learning is a mechanism to turn experience into learning. As a mechanism for self-directed learning, it is critical for success at work. This is true for individual employees, but also for teams and whole organizations. Change processes are typical situations in which people question their practices, reflect on how they adopt new practice and try to learn from good or bad practice for future work. Such changes can support the development of expertise. In cases involving substantive changes in work roles and behaviours they may even contribute to a process of professional identity transformation, which leads to a deeper understanding of one's own practice and of the processes involved in adapting it to internal and external constraints. Public administrations are examples of organisations that undergo constant change due to changes in legislation, financial pressure and demands of the public, and the public intensively observes them. These pressures are requiring staff to adapt, including by changing their professional identities. Integrating reflection into the practice of staff can support them in informal learning and improving, and it can thus lead to enhanced and more efficient services for the public. In this paper, we report on an approach of using reflection in Public Employment Services (PES) in Europe, which are currently being transformed from being principally concerned with administration of benefits and provision of advice and guidance to an increasing concern with coaching clients and co-operating with employers.

## 1 Introduction

Reflection is a common and desirable process of *learning from experience for future work* [1–3], which is carried out by individuals or groups in a self-directed manner and as a mostly informal learning process [4–6]. Reflection helps workers to deal with changing work contexts [4], supports them to create innovative practices [7] and enables them to create change in a bottom-up process [6]. Besides daily problems, upcoming and continuous change processes are typical examples in which people question the way they work(ed) and whether they have adopted new processes adequately.

*Public administrations* are typical examples of organizations facing constant change, due to: legislative changes, budget and staff cuts, requirement for remaining

staff to become more efficient, the public demand for higher service quality, role changes for staff, and, in some cases, alternative service provision (e.g., [8]).

Our work focuses on *Public Employment Services* (PES) as an example of challenges faced at public administrations: staff are dealing with more clients in a rapidly changing labour market and are expected to offer a wider range of services. In many European countries staff roles are being transformed from offering advice on access to benefits and available job opportunities towards facilitation and coaching where staff are expected to support clients in becoming more self-directed and staff are also expected to understand the labour market better and engage more with employers. Staff therefore need to be capable of adapting to various and often unforeseeable changes. *Career adaptability* [9] as a process of continuously adapting to changing requirements on the labour market is a central concept in this context. This process is closely connected to self-reflection and reflection in groups [9], but work investigating reflection support tools for career adaptability is not available. This paper connects research on reflection support to career adaptability research by presenting a conceptual approach and a prototype to support this process with reflection tools.

## 2 Related Work

### 2.1 Career Adaptability and Professional Identity Transformation

Career adaptability is the ability to manage successful transitions in employment, training, education and other contexts. It is key for workers dealing with constantly changing requirements on the labour market [9]. Adapting careers, however, needs a transformation of one's individual and collective *professional identity*, including aspects such as work activities and organisation, relations to other professions and professional culture [10]. This transformation can be triggered by challenges at work and needs self-directed learning, self-reflection and learning in interaction with others [9]. Therefore support needs to include individual and collective means.

*Public Employment Services* (PES) practitioners deal with career adaptability both in their personal careers and in the careers of clients they are supporting. Therefore supporting them in career adaptability not only supports their personal career but also supports their clients to re-enter the labour market.

### 2.2 Reflective Learning at Work

Following Boud (1985) [1] we understand reflection as a process of *conscious re-evaluation of experience for the purpose of guiding future behaviour*. This perspective is in line with the conception proposed by Schön (1983) [3], who in addition differentiates between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, and other authors dealing with reflective learning. In addition, we understand work and learning as intertwined [3, 11], and therefore also work and reflection [12]: reflection transforms experience from work into knowledge applicable to the challenges of daily work and thus needs to be understood as a key process for informal learning at the workplace [5]. It is

mostly triggered when individuals or groups perceive some discrepancy, e.g. contradictory information, incongruent feelings, interpersonal conflicts and other occurrences during work, leading to a state of discomfort that the individual or group wants to overcome [13]. Characteristic activities of reflection can then be found in asking for feedback on your work and opinions, critical opinion sharing (and being open to it in the organisation) or challenging groupthink (instead of going with the majority) [14].

In addition to most models we differentiate between *individual reflection* as a mostly cognitive activity and *collaborative reflection*, which is done in communication among peers in a group [15]. The latter has been found to create results that transcend the capabilities of a group's members [7] and it is a promising process for the creation of innovation and change in modern workplaces [4], but it has received less attention in work on reflection at work. Knipfer et al. (2013) [13] point out that as workplaces provide individuals with a social context, individual and collaborative learning are intertwined and must be considered together.

It has been shown that reflective learning can be supported by technology (e.g., [15–17]) by providing data or written content on experiences to reflect upon, supporting retrospective analysis or by scaffolding the reflective process, the documenting and sharing of a decision rationale. More specifically, writing down positive or negative experiences and being prompted regularly to think about them has been shown to be supportive for individuals to engage in continuous reflection [18]. However, as most existing work either supports early phases of reflection (e.g., gathering and sharing data) or stems from educational settings, which are often designed in favour of reflective learning, there is still work to be done in the context of reflection at work.

### **3 Reflection for Professional Identity Transformation: A Concept**

The development of career adaptability relies on four key dimensions: learning to adapt through challenging work, through updating a substantive knowledge base, by being self-directed and self-reflexive as well as learning through interactions at work [9]. In this section we show how reflection can support these dimensions and how this can be used as a basis of professional identity transformation.

Dealing with *challenging work* can bring up discrepancies in daily work, which (as described above) trigger reflection [13]. Successfully dealing with these situations can lead to confidence in one's skills and abilities. Reflecting about work and its challenges comes into play when there are no problem solving patterns available for the challenges met and new solutions are needed [19].

To keep up with knowledge in changing fields of work learning through *updating a substantive knowledge base* is required. While workers often use formal learning offers at work, informal learning can be seen as a key to continuously understand which knowledge is needed and integrate it into one's context [9]. Reflection can support these needs [5] and the integration of new knowledge [20], helping workers to think about the state of their own knowledge and to identify learning goals, reviewing existing goals and periodically checking whether they are met or need to be altered.

Adapting through *self-directed learning* and *self-reflexiveness* is closely related to *individual* reflection. Tools can help to sustain issues to be reflected upon and to create awareness for them [12, 18]. This combines self-directed and externally triggered reflection, for example by setting up and periodically reviewing career goals in a tool.

Career adaptability by learning through interactions at work can benefit from support for *collaborative* reflection. Tools can help to create opportunities for reflection even if individuals cannot meet in person [15]. Individuals can support informal learning of their peers by providing their experiences and insights or helping them to reflect about their own learning. Additionally colleagues can reflect to support each other, for example, in coping with emotional work and/or stress and in exchanging best practices in dealing with difficult situations. A team can reflect collaboratively to improve their team performance and organize their learning efforts.

## **4 Applying the Concept: Reflective Learning Needs in Practice**

Our work is inspired by field visits, workshops and expert interviews at different European *Public Employment Services* (PES) agencies, including Germany, Slovenia and the UK. In an early phase of this work we are currently exploring needs and opportunities for reflective learning as well as constraints and potential of implementing it in such workplaces. From this work we describe examples of challenges faced in many European PES and how reflection can be a key process in tackling them.

### **4.1 Supporting Change by Reflection on Training**

In one of the agencies (referred to as agency A in this paper) staff are supposed to change from providing advice and guidance to clients on benefits and job opportunities to coaching them to become more self-directed and to take responsibility for their own future by proactively looking for ways to develop their skills and possible future career paths. To support this change staff receive a two-day training on coaching methods and related topics and an additional half-day session some time after training to support the application of the methods in practice. Despite this support, staff members reported that they had difficulties in implementing this new way of working, and that they were struggling in reaching good results from coaching their clients.

This situation is an example of challenging work, and it shows how workers struggle with updating their personal knowledge base. Reflecting on their practice of using methods and tools of coaching can help PES practitioners to conduct more successfully the transition to be a coach and thus may make training more sustainable. This may approach mostly benefits from *individual* reflection of goals stemming from training and involving workers in this reflection continuously (by reminding them to reflect).

### **4.2 Supporting Interaction with External Stakeholders by Reflection**

In agency B the government requires PES staff to cooperate closely with employers to enhance the conditions of the labour market, including the creation of new jobs, new

fields of employment and career opportunities. Staff are motivated to adapt to this strategy, but also told us that this does not come easy and that there is a need for good practices in implementing it. Some reported that talking to colleagues from other subsidiaries had given them insights into how they might improve this work.

Becoming a co-operator with employers can be seen as an example of challenging work, and from the feedback of practitioners we can see which discrepancies it causes. We can also see that there is a desire to engage in exchange with others to reflect on such discrepancies. *Collaborative* reflection on their work with employers can therefore be seen as a means to make sense of typical challenges in this work, to exchange work practices and to learn from each other.

## 5 A Prototype for Reflection Support

The scenarios above show that support needs for learning about challenges *Public Employment Services* (PES) practitioners face are diverse, and that support for sustaining experiences, reflecting upon them, sharing them and finding similar experiences need to be close to work tasks. To explore how such support can create impact in PES agencies we created a mobile prototype supporting the reflective learning scenarios describe above. Using mobile devices makes support independent from corporate IT infrastructures (which are usually hard to access away from the office in PES) and enables users to use the tool when and where they want, for example after talking to employers or after work, e.g. while using public transportation on the way home.

In the prototype users can write personal notes about experiences at work (upper part of Fig. 1) and they can enter reflections multiple times about these notes (bottom part of Fig. 1), including an assessment of how they feel about the experience (see the smiley icons in the bottom half of Fig. 1).

The prototype also includes an easy to use sharing feature to enable *collaborative* reflection. To enhance personal engagement in collaborative reflection, when sharing content with colleagues the system offers users the opportunity to choose from predefined questions (or create a new question) to share together with the content. This aims at provoking reflection: For ex-

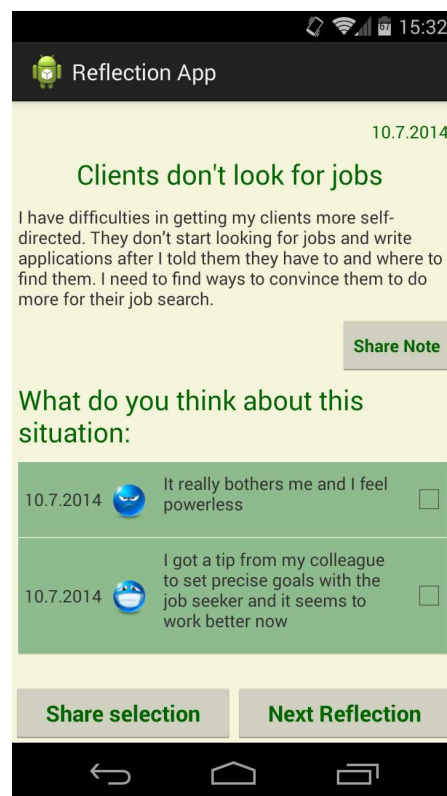


Fig. 1. The prototype allows users to write notes and to reflect on them. All notes and reflections can be shared.

ample, as user might choose a question such as “Did you ever encounter a similar situation? What did you do?” when sharing the description of an issue. This may personally impact colleagues, who feel personally invited to engage with the user sharing the content and motivated to help her. This may help to establish communities of practice helping each other and it facilitates collaborative reflection by engaging users in conversations about *challenging work*.

The tool periodically prompts users individually or collaboratively to revisit past issues and reflections. This can be useful to capture changes in perspectives on experiences over time and the resulting insights leading to this change. For example, if a user from agency A experiences she cannot implement a certain aspect of the new coaching process, she may improve over time, also rating this experience more positive after some time (see Fig. 1). It is also possible just to share one of the newer entries of a reflection with another user to enable collaborative reflection on specific aspects of the evolving situation. Using the tool in this way builds up an individual and collective knowledge base on aspects related to career adaptability.

Users control when they are prompted for reflection: they can let the system (contextually) determine when to prompt them or they can set reminders to reflect. This for example can be used to notify a user while she is using the bus on the way home and wants to reflect on situations she had experienced that day. This supports *self-reflexiveness* as part of career adaptability.

The prototype provides novel features such as sharing personal questions with reflection content and periodically promoting users for individual and collaborative reflection, which are directed towards engaging with challenging work and to support career adaptability. Future work will also aim to integrate its features into existing tools in order to better integrate reflection for career adaptability into daily tasks.

## 6 Discussion and Outlook

We have presented ongoing work in supporting career adaptability in public administration workplaces by reflection support. Our work is in its early stages, and we have created a concept for such support, situated it in needs of learning in PES organizations as typical examples of public administration and showed its feasibility by implementing a prototype. Next steps will include using the prototype with groups of PES practitioners in different agencies and improving the support it provides. In the ARTEL workshop we would like to discuss the concept and how it may be improved.

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