

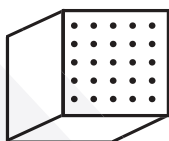


Employability Service

A Methodology Guide



This is our common ground



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Introduction

This guide is a concise text aiming to describe the main methodological guidelines that:

- a) Are followed by SolidarityNow's employability team;
- b) are expressed through the wider framework of the organization's commitment to supporting the people it serves in the process of their integration, reintegration, and vocational guidance.

It is a map that helps the reader understand how we aim to reach our goal of holistic labor integration, supporting individuals to become autonomous and self-sufficient.

It is worth noting that each Employability Officer has their own separate and comprehensive professional identity, which they employ to best serve each individual case.

Vocational Counseling

The conceptual variations of the terms “Counseling and Vocational Guidance”, “Vocational Counseling”, “Career Counseling and Vocational Guidance”, “Career Counseling” and others, do not fall within the scope of this guide. **In this guide, the term Vocational Counseling is used throughout, and reference to the respective professionals is made by using the term Employability Officers.**

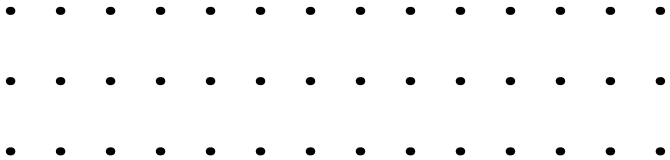
The term Vocational Counseling refers to the support provided to an individual in order to develop professionally and overcome the challenges they face in joining the labor market.

Many sciences are applicable to the field of Vocational Counseling (Psychology, Sociology, Economics, Pedagogy, etc.), each one approaching it from a different point of view.

Vocational Counseling can, however, be understood as **the set of actions carried out, in an organized and systematic manner, by professionals with special training to help the individual make the most appropriate decisions for themselves regarding their professional life and relevant preparation** (Kassotakis, 2004). In other words, it is the process through which the Employability Officer supports the individual to iterate, identify, and implement decisions regarding their employment, and to adapt their course of action to those decisions.

In addition, Vocational Counseling is a complex process encompassing a whole range of life experiences, as professional development issues concern human development as a whole. Factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, physical abilities, family influences, geography, and other environmental variables influence both Vocational Counseling as a process, and the choices of the person supported. People living in conditions of social exclusion, which includes people with different cultural and religious identities, people with disabilities, and people with mental pathologies, need Vocational Counseling services for their integration and reintegration, both into the labor market and into the wider society.

Social exclusions arise as a result of society’s discrimination against the individuals concerned. Services specializing in supporting people living in conditions of social exclusion should focus on the individuals’ empowerment, as well as the improvement of their living conditions to shift the balance of the scales towards their professional integration.



Stages of Vocational Counseling

It is beyond the scope of this guide to present theories of professional development. They are part of the Employability Officer's toolkit; depending on the needs of the specific person they are supporting, Officers will choose the most appropriate tool. Beyond traditional theories, such as traits and factors theories (Parsons, Holland), developmental theories (Super, Gootfredson), and social cognitive theories (Bandura, Lent, Brown and Hackett), there are also some newly developed ones, such as career construction theories (Savickas, Guichard) and theories that emphasize the effects of randomness in a constantly changing environment (Krumboltz, Pryor and Bright). The latter correspond more accurately to contemporary socio-economic developments (Drossos, 2021).

Different theories lead to different models for the provision of Vocational Counseling services. However, the below stages are incorporated, one way or another, in the systematized or individualized approach each Employability Officer follows:

- 1. Reception of the individual and investigation of the request:** In the first stage, the foundations of the counseling relationship are set, the framework for cooperation is established, the individual's request is examined, and the objectives of the counseling process are defined.
- 2. Personal and professional exploration:** Self-awareness is facilitated as interests, abilities, values, desires, and other personal characteristics are explored.
- 3. Process of personal and professional development:** The goal at this stage is the personal and professional development of the individual and their mobilization to take action.
- 4. Development of an action plan:** This stage concerns decision-making and especially the elaboration of an action plan to achieve the individual's goals.
- 5. Feedback/support:** Follow-up sessions are carried out to assess the implementation of the action plan and to assist the individual in dealing with any obstacles. Further empowerment and other relevant activities can contribute to the effectiveness of the counseling process. If the need arises, the action plan can be reconfigured (Drossos, 2021).

Vocational Counseling Process

The above are complemented by the National Centre for Vocational Guidance's characterization of the Vocational Counseling process (2002), which is comprised of:

- a) information gathering, including the collection, processing, and dissemination of wide-ranging information on education, training and employment opportunities, labor market trends and developments, as well as available employment opportunities,
- b) development of self-awareness through relevant counseling support aiming to better understand one's own strengths and weaknesses, inclinations, interests, and values,
- c) improvement of decision-making skills, in other words support provision for individuals to be able to select the most appropriate career paths for themselves at the given time, but also systematically for the long-term,
- d) implementation of an action plan, whereby assistance is provided to the individual to assist them in taking the actions or moving forward with the activities that will lead them to depart from their current professional situation towards the new desired one. It is a dynamic process that mainly concerns the individual's own active search for employment that meets their needs.



Establishing a Counseling Relationship

A key element of every counseling process is the establishment of the relationship between the two parties. The development of a genuine and productive relationship between the Officer and the person supported is a prerequisite for the provision of quality Vocational Counseling services. It is an equal relationship, characterized by involvement and active participation on both sides. **There are various elements that help build an effective counseling relationship, such as creating an atmosphere of trust, empathy, and authenticity, as well as discussing and negotiating the relationship so that the expectations and the role of each party are mutually clear.**

Vocational Counseling interventions can take the following forms:

- Individual counseling: It is carried out between the Employability Officer and the individual supported, aiming towards the latter's professional development, while at the same time dealing with obstacles and difficulties in professional integration and in making professional or educational decisions.
- Group counseling: It is carried out between the Employability Officer and a group of people facing similar issues of labor integration. Group counseling often runs in parallel with individual counseling. In the group context, the counseling process focuses on the issues that are common among participants, while in the individual context it focuses on the most individualized ones.
- Skills development workshops: Participants are informed and trained by the Employability Officer on issues related to their vocational integration and development (such as labor rights, job search methods, voluntary submission of interest).

Intercultural counseling

Intercultural counseling is a transversal approach, rather than an expression of a particular theoretical current of counseling. **At the core of the intercultural counseling process is the admission that the individual needs to overcome the difficulties and obstacles of everyday life within the new culture; the individual may even view the counseling process itself as a part of this harsh reality.** As outlined by the National Organization for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP, 2011), the implementation of intercultural counseling should consider the following principles:

- 1 People of a different culture have the right to benefit from counseling.
- 2 The “dominant” culture is hostile to individuals from different cultures on many levels.
- 3 Professionals serving people of different cultures need to be fully aware of the extent of their own internalized ethnocentrism and stereotypes, and to be able to see beyond their cultural bias.
- 4 Socioeconomic class and gender are two factors that interact crucially with culture and have a great influence on the counseling process.

In the context of the relationship between the Officer and the beneficiary, both parties are called upon to manage an unfamiliar reality. Language, communication, and issues of “power”, or power dynamics, are three of the most important elements in the intercultural relationship. **Since communication is the main tool for developing the counseling relationship, the Officer must be able to understand what the beneficiary expresses both verbally and non-verbally, consciously and unconsciously.** In order to significantly reduce the risk of miscommunication, the Employability Officer should have considerable skills in intercultural counseling.

“Cross-cultural awareness means being able to distinguish between the directly observable and the implicit.”

(Hofstede & Pedersen in EOPPEP, 2011β: 37)

More specifically, **the effectiveness of an Employability Officer who supports people from different cultural backgrounds is enhanced by the acquisition and continued development of the below, among others:**

Intercultural knowledge: This means that the Officer must be able to understand the social role of minorities in their country, to know enough about the culture of the people they support, and to understand the difficulties and obstacles encountered by members of minorities in their daily contact with different services.

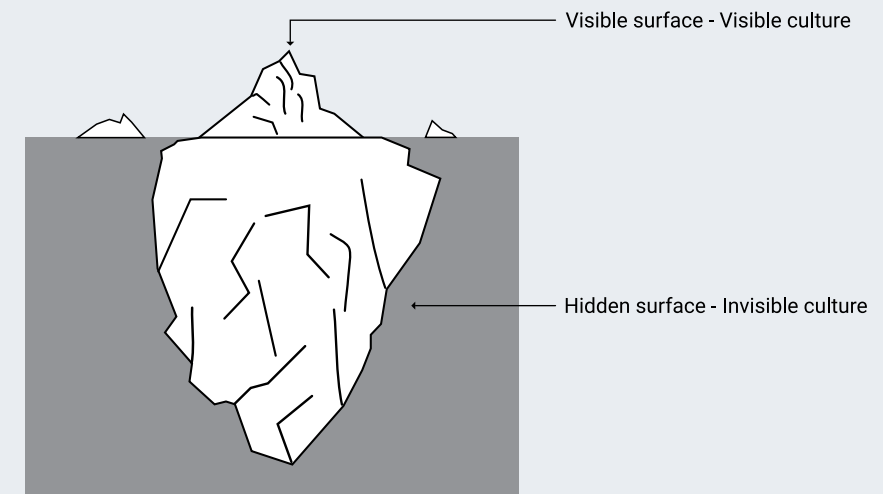
Intercultural awareness: The consultant must be in a continuous effort to deepen the knowledge of their own cultural background, to be aware of the internalized beliefs and values stemming from that background, to feel comfortable and accept the cultural differences between themselves and the beneficiary, and to realize that no counseling theory can be politically and morally neutral.

Intercultural skills: This consists of the ability to share and respect the beneficiary's worldview, complemented by a set of verbal and non-verbal communication skills suitable for several different cultural contexts. The Officer should also be able to both understand and to communicate verbal and non-verbal messages accurately when engaging with people from different cultures, and to be flexible in changing or adapting their own working framework to accommodate the beneficiary's individual needs (EOPPEP, 2011b: 37-8).

However, given that the attempt to approach a person from another culture can never reach complete identification, the Officer should have realistic expectations of their own cultural dexterity's limitations. Being cognizant of their de facto position of power, aware of internal and external limitations, and accepting and empathetic towards beneficiaries, can help cope with any moments of discomfort between the two parties. Those are guaranteed to arise; however, it has been observed that they are significantly reduced when the Officer and the beneficiary share something in common along some of the components of their different social identities, such as sharing the same gender, age, religion, lifestyle, etc. (EOPPEP, 2011b).

“Culture is like an iceberg: the deeper layers (traditions, values, attitudes) are hidden from our immediate view and perspective.”

(Pedersen in EOPPEP, 2011β: 6)



Code of Conduct

The Employability Service and the Employability Officers of SolidarityNow are committed to and comply with the statutory Code of Conduct of the Provision of Lifelong Counseling Services for Vocational & Career Guidance, as defined by the National Agency for the Certification of Qualifications and Vocational Guidance (EOPPEP, 2013). The Code of Conduct predicates that the Employability Officer must comply with the following moral obligations and principles when engaging with beneficiaries:

- 1 Principle of autonomy
- 2 Principle of equality (non-discrimination)
- 3 Principle of impartiality
- 4 Principle of the holistic approach
- 5 Principle of transparency
- 6 Principle of confidentiality
- 7 Principle of referral
- 8 Principle of reliable information

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Employability Officers' Profile

The Employability Officers of SolidarityNow are graduates of Social Sciences, Humanities, or Economics studies, with further specializations in Education and training in Vocational Counseling.

In addition, they have extensive experience as Employability Officers, supporting and empowering people from different cultural backgrounds and those facing multiple social exclusions; Officers also cultivate adaptive social and communication skills. **Some of the basic skills and techniques that are key in achieving effective communication between the Officer and the beneficiary are, among others: non-verbal communication, active listening, encouragement, asking questions, accepting silence, rephrasing, reflection of emotions, feedback/summary of the session.**

Employability Officers have cultivated specific skills related to intercultural professional counseling, such as cultural empathy and balance (EOPPEP, 2011a), and hence can respond with greater readiness to the issues of people in minority groups. The Officers' personal and professional development is considered a priority, both by the Officers themselves and by the organization; not only does this make them more effective and empowered as individuals, but it also positively impacts the quality of SN's Employability Services as a whole.

Employability Officers are often called upon to cooperate with other professionals coming from related disciplines. Interdisciplinarity, in other words the recognition of complementarity across disciplines, is often considered a necessary condition to cater to the diverse issues faced by the people requiring our services. SolidarityNow's multi-year experience is a testament to the fact that the Employability Service needs to be framed by other services and professionals (such as social workers, lawyers, interpreters, etc.), otherwise it becomes very difficult to comprehensively address needs and obstacles and effectively assist beneficiaries to seek or accept a job opportunity.

Conditions of social exclusion and labor integration of minority groups

Here, we refer to the social exclusions faced by people receiving employability services. **The concept of social exclusion does not only encompass inequality, poverty, and deprivation; it generally reflects the entrapment of individuals and groups in complex and multidimensional mechanisms that result in the nullification of their individual choices and social rights, and leading to social marginalization and stigmatization, economic deprivation, institutional exclusions, educational restrictions, and social and professional deadlocks.** People living with, or threatened by, social exclusion usually belong to vulnerable groups, but may also fall under more mainstream social categories. Their gender, age, class, race, and other factors consolidate social inequalities and hinder their integration or reintegration into the labor market.

The most common groups threatened by social exclusion are women, young people, single-parent families, people with limited literacy, homeless people, migrants and refugees, people with disabilities, people with mental and other serious illnesses, victims of trafficking and torture, drug users and former drug users, religious or cultural minorities, juvenile offenders, and former prisoners. **It is understood that some people combine the characteristics of more than one of the above categories, and face multiple obstacles concerning their social and labor integration. For this reason, a holistic approach addressing the needs and demands of these individuals is necessary, otherwise the effectiveness of the support provided for labor integration is reduced.**

There is widespread interest in research on the challenges of defining terms such as “race”, “ethnicity” and “minority group”, as well as others related to cultural diversity and its impact on professional development and labor integration in the dominant environment. Certainly, minority groups are not homogeneous, but consist of multiple distinct subgroups with their own characteristics. In addition, there are large variations between people belonging to the same racial group in terms of their level of acculturation, degree of identification with the racial identity, socio-economic status, and many other variables.

“Vulnerability is not an innate state, but a state induced by one’s surroundings, by the context in which we function.”

However, in addition to the great variations between people from different cultural backgrounds, the following difficulties and characteristics are identified concerning their integration in employment:

- Social isolation (discrimination, prejudice, limited language proficiency).
- The need for immediate entry into the labor market due to financial problems.
- Low self-esteem because of experiences of discrimination and negative stereotyping.
- Problems in choosing a profession due to socio-economic handicaps.
- Increased family responsibilities (such as single parenthood or early maternity).
- Patterns of limited career choices and a tendency to find a culturally acceptable profession, whereby individuals are led to jobs that correspond to low-level social activities and interests.
- The dominant group has career stereotypes about members of racial and ethnic minorities, leading minority members to seek low-status professions, where it is easier to be employed.
- Lack of self-awareness, career goals and values conflicting with other important personal goals.
- Incomplete and unreliable professional information.
- Difficulty in identifying and taking advantage of professional opportunities. (EOPPEP, 2011a)

As outlined above, Vocational Counseling is particularly pertinent for people from different cultural backgrounds. Even more so, cases where the individual's inadequate knowledge of the Greek language, and hence where the contribution of an interpreter is necessary, deserve special mention. The interpreter, who largely undertakes the additional role of cultural mediator, plays a key role in rendering the relationship of the Employability Officer with the beneficiary effective. The interpreter-cultural mediator comes from the population in question, speaks both languages, and is familiar with both cultures. Thus, beyond undertaking simple interpretation, they also contribute to the general facilitation of the counseling session, in order to reduce the chances of misinterpretation, misunderstandings, and discomfort due to cultural differences. A special effort must be made to broaden the employment opportunities for women and socially excluded groups in general. Moreover, this must be complemented by capacity building, public awareness raising, and advocating for legislative and other provisions for equal treatment in the workplace.

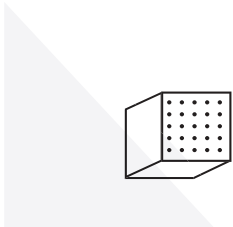
There can be no one-size-fits-all approach for groups of people living in conditions of social exclusion. In many cases, specific provisions are needed to reach out to members of minority or other social groups, and specific conditions for the development and efficient operation of interventions.

Teams Empowerment

People have a variety of needs that ought to be addressed in a multidisciplinary fashion; with that in mind, SolidarityNow offers Vocational Counseling services complemented by others, such as psychosocial and legal support, and access to education and training opportunities. **It is only through this holistic supportive framework that it becomes possible to identify and address the multiple exclusions that people face. Employability Officers, and SN's support staff in general, subscribe to the evidence-based belief that recovering from difficulties is possible through undertaking responsibility and initiative, both key drivers of empowerment, with the ultimate goal of achieving autonomy as soon as possible.**

“Behind the labels there is an individual.”

For groups of people with zero or limited access to the Employability Service due to a more serious vulnerability or other reasons, SolidarityNow is making all possible efforts, in cooperation with other partners, to reach out, raise awareness and empower these populations. Such cases may be women of certain minority groups, residents of remote refugee camps or shelters, young refugees or asylum seekers close to adulthood, single parents, etc. These interventions are targeted and utilize tailored empowerment methods depending on each specific context.



Networking with businesses

The Employability Service seeks to have an up-to-date and an ever-widening understanding of labor market conditions. This enables counselors to identify labor market trends and dynamics, skills that are on demand, and emerging human resources needs, on both the local and the regional level.

Through the long-term networking of the Employability Service with the labor market, a dynamic and constantly expanding network of cooperating businesses has been developed.

Even though SolidarityNow's active engagement in networking with businesses depends on the capability and priorities of the organization, over the years a dynamic and reliable network of businesses has been cultivated, making job placements possible for a large number of the Employability Service's beneficiaries. The methodology for approaching businesses involves practices like outreach through snowball sampling, public awareness raising, and development of collaborations with local employers and industries.

Networking with businesses brings mutual benefits. On the one hand, it helps businesses find the personnel they are seeking, and on the other hand, through our mediation, those whose social or other characteristics deprive them of access to better and legal employment opportunities are adequately matched.

The Employability Service's contribution attempts to bridge the gap between the two parties, always prioritizing beneficiaries' labor integration. The Employability Service applies a number of due diligence processes regarding the integrity and reliability of the company with which a beneficiary is linked. This is of utmost importance to ensure, to the degree possible, that a match between the prospective employer and the employee involves a low risk of deviation from labor law and decent work conditions. In addition to that, SolidarityNow's goal is to raise employers' awareness about the employment of new, dynamic, rich in skills and knowledge, and culturally diverse personnel, and hence the reduction of prejudice against these groups.

Networking with services, organizations and social actors

SolidarityNow is actively involved in, and in some cases has set up and maintains local networks promoting the employment of minorities and other groups. These networks aim to unite forces and resources and exchange information, know-how and best practices, always with the goal of providing the most effective support for the people served.

The Employability Service, either individually or through networking with other organizations and social institutions, has organized, inter alia, career days to connect the population groups it supports with the labor market, awareness-raising for prospective employers, and capacity building activities for elected representatives of the local government, civil servants, private sector employees, and members of civil society.

Assessing and expanding access and services

SolidarityNow's Employability Service is committed to the constant development of assessment procedures and to the quality assurance of services provided. Access to guaranteed high quality services is seen as a high priority objective, in order to improve the efficiency and consistency of the services and encourage the accountability and responsibility of the organization and its professionals.



Conclusions

The economic recession is putting great pressure both on people trying to enter the labor market, and those trying to remain employed; it also puts a strain on the professionals and services that support them in this effort. The constant adverse changes in social and economic realities require a redefinition of the concept of vocational counseling, a revision of the employability services provided, and the further specialization of counselors to effectively face the new challenges.

The SolidarityNow Employability Service is highly committed to supporting the integration of its beneficiaries, aiming first of all to enhance access to the services provided and second, to continuously improve the quality and effectiveness of those services.

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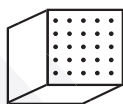
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