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Validation of the Lifelong Learning Document Tool – Results and Implications

For better readability the male form was chosen in the text. Nevertheless, all information in this document refers to members of both genders on equal terms.

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Introduction

During the course of the project's runtime, we developed the Lifelong Learning Document Tool (LLDT), an instrument for self-evaluation. It is the core of the TeBeVAT process. This excel file contains all the information about the candidate and his competences. In a self-evaluation the candidate has to indicate how he masters a number of tasks on the job. The self-evaluation in the LLDT builds the foundation for the TeBeVAT skills scan. The mentor reviews carefully, together with the candidate, his competences and derives possibilities, realistic goals and options. It sets directions for an assessment and should trigger reflection of what a person can do and how to develop.

It was our goal to put this tool to a reality test and find out whether the TeBeVAT process could be accepted and where to head in the future. The goal was to see how the self-evaluation performed and what our end-customers think of it. We knew that the current solution with an excel file could not be the format of choice on the long run. From the beginning it was our idea that, ideally, we would develop an online-database solution that is free to use for everyone. Nevertheless, we think that testing the current version of the tool and the overall approach of TeBeVAT helped us gain a deeper understanding of the existing state and future improvements. Gathering opinions from potential end users is critical to develop a tool that suits their needs and satisfies their demands. We even go a step further back because we wanted to see if there is a demand for assessing informal learning outcomes. We did a qualitative validation of the tool that serves as basis for further deeper analysis of the LLDT. We tried to find out if a process with a multilevel assessment of abilities can be a suiting strategy for the validation of outcomes of informal learning. We interviewed a number of event-technicians in each country after they had completed the first part of the TeBeVAT process. In this document, we will first explain how we proceeded, and which methods were used. We then sum up how we analyzed the data and explain the results in detail. At the end there is a short summary of what we found. We will derive implications and give an outlook what it means for TeBeVAT in the future.

We like to thank all the candidates that supported us in making this analysis happen and spending their valuable time in summer, the busiest time of the festival period.

Method

Sample

In total, 25 interviews with potential candidates were conducted. In addition, we interviewed the respective mentors that guided those candidates through the process. We collected answers in Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain and Austria. All answers were gathered anonymously and only minimum personal information that seemed

relevant for the analysis (like information about their current working situation and a typical work day) was recorded.

All of the interviewed persons had work experience or currently still work in the event-, stage-, or creative sector. Seven of the interview partners indicated to be freelancers. One person indicated to be currently unemployed and one person to be still in an apprenticeship. The rest worked in a regular employment relationship. Also their work experience differed greatly, from still being an apprentice to 30 years of experience. About half of the candidates (11 persons) indicated to have work experience abroad in a country different from their home country. Five of the eleven persons have indicated to have worked in several foreign countries in the past. Most countries named were within the EU. Additionally, the candidates listed South Africa and Korea as countries outside of Europe. Analyzing the descriptions of a typical work day and what they said about their background, we found not all candidates worked in the job they had learned. They listed jobs like teacher, IT expert, graphic designer, or a degree in statistics.

This picture seems quite reasonable. We are talking about a heterogeneous sector with high mobility of workers within the European Union. Also typical is that you would find a relatively high number of career changers that have different educational background all working within the event-, stage-, or creative sector. We collected from our perspective a quite representative cross-section of answers, even though we did not reach our self-set target number of interviews.

Procedure

We tried to gather a realistic picture of how the TeBeVAT process works and whether the Lifelong Learning Document Tool (LLDT) is an appropriate instrument for self-evaluation and a skills scan. Therefore, we asked candidates and mentors to complete together the first half of the process, the Identification and Documentation phase. Before start, written consent for participation and a data privacy statement was handed out. They received double copy, one to keep for their own records and one for us. For data privacy protection and due the fact that the intended online platform could not be implemented in the scope of this project, we had to do a little work-around for the gathering of evidence. Mentor and candidate had to meet in person to look at the evidence of the candidate on his personal computer or in paper. The personal information provided therein would not be send around or saved on any device other than the candidates' own. We avoided collecting any information that may allow to identify a certain person in the analysis later. Participants were also asked for their consent, if they agreed that the interview is recorded.

Before start, each candidate was informed about the idea and intentions of TeBeVAT. They received an overview of the process and the excel file of the LLDT. To make this anonymous, a code was assigned to each person, so that we could identify and match the

filled out excel file with the interviews. The code basically counted the number of persons that were interviewed and the country. Accordingly, Candidate_5_DE means it is the fifth person in Germany that was handed out the excel file to complete.

A mentor was assigned each candidate that helped filling out the excel file. He answered questions about the competences and supported the candidate linking his documents and other records to the competences. We did not force a fixed number of meetings between mentor and candidate. Only one meeting was required to be able to review the evidence the candidate brought. This was intended to see what worked out and how much support of the mentor was needed. The mentor should describe how the relationship developed and how many meetings they had over the course of the process. It stopped with the documentation phase.

After all this was completed, we conducted interviews with the candidates and the mentor to hear their personal opinion. Interviews were done with a standardized guideline that had to be followed by the interviewer. It contained about 30 questions concerning the process, the LLDT, the competences, the interaction between mentor and candidate and many more. The complete guideline can be found in a separate, uploaded document and in the file with the analysis of the interviews.

Analysis of Data

Because we interviewed candidates in 5 different countries that speak different native languages, we did not do a full audio recording and transcription of answers. It would have been very hard to find a common and reliable system of transcription for the answers across the different languages. Instead the interviewer was asked to write down what the person had said and conduct the interview in English if the language skills of the candidate allowed for it. In case the language skills were not good enough, a translation of the answers was done after the interview. All answers were gathered in one file. Analysis and coding were done following an approach roughly based on grounded theory. An open coding strategy (compare Schmidt, Dunger, Schulz, 2015) was used. With this technique of analysis, all theoretical concepts that the answers may contain are collected resulting in a list of different aspects. They again can be hierarchically ordered in broader factors that have common ground. All answers were coded consistently until no new aspects in the answers were identified. Sometimes an answer contained more than one aspect. In these cases, the answer was taken into consideration twice, for both aspects to cover the full range and sense of what was said. Sometimes we asked the candidate something, but their answer referred to another question or added on to what was said before. By clustering according to qualitative aspects, we covered this up because the coding system allowed categorization independently of the question. In the second step, an axial coding, the existing categories were cross-checked. We looked for inconsistencies or overlaps between them. If necessary, the category was either redefined or further refined into two aspects.

Than the answers from the old category were clustered again in the new categories. Finally, to get the full picture of what was said, we analyzed the frequencies of the different named aspects (e.g. what aspects were named only by one person or several or by all). This in combination gave us good hints of the strengths and weaknesses of the TeBeVAT process and the LLDT.

Results

General Idea of TeBeVAT

How was the general idea and approach of TeBeVAT received? Is the product that we developed meaningful overall? We also wanted to know what the advantages of TeBeVAT are. What could motivate a stage- and event technician to participate in the process? The general idea of TeBeVAT was well accepted. Almost all of the candidates liked it and though it is a good concept to be enthusiastic about. Only one person answered: *"it's bureaucratic, but maybe helpful"*. TeBeVAT seems to have high relevance especially for younger employees and the next generation of stage- and event technicians. One advantage is that TeBeVAT allows to identify competences that someone has. The results can be used on the job market, as a reference for future employers. It reduces the effort of later examination for persons without formal education. It shows what they are capable of doing and what they have learned in the past. Thinking on a bigger level, an accreditation or certification of relevant competences on European level is another positive aspect that was named as advantage of TeBeVAT. The global impression seems positive and the interviewed persons were eager to find out more. Exemplary answers can be found in the blue box below.

Examples Answers

- *"I'm very enthusiastic about the basic idea."*
- *"I think it's a good thing."*
- *"Yes, especially for young technicians."*
- *"Good for next generation"*
- *"We need something to help us show our skills and remind us of what we can do."*
- *"Yes it helps with self-assessment + apply for jobs"*
- *"I think it could be a good thing for European wide alignment"*
- *"The advantage is that one can with nonformal competencies reduce the effort in the formal exam, there is less learning effort. practical knowledge is important on the job, and cannot be replaced by theoretical exams."*

Triggering Reflection and Awareness

Have the candidates ever thought about informal learning before they came across TeBeVAT? Do they believe it is an important thing? We wanted to know if awareness exists and whether TeBeVAT could be a tool to get people to reflect that learning also takes place outside of school or other formal education. The answers clearly show that about half of the interviewed persons did not think about the importance of informal learning before. The other half was well aware and even experienced it themselves. Some had a biography that was based on informal learning experiences in their CV. For those who have not thought about it before, TeBeVAT well triggers awareness and recalls the importance. The benefit goes beyond a plain certification of informal learning outcomes. Completing the self-evaluation adds value to the candidates. It helps them find out about their capabilities and how much they learned. Some candidates were able to reveal new competences that they were unaware of before, like sales experience, customer service skills and more. It can even have a motivational component to develop and further evolve with the things learned in the past. Examples are in the blue box below. The overall idea was well liked, our interview partners saw the value it added. It made them aware of informal learning and what they are capable of. But did they understand the process and the Lifelong Learning Document Tool?

Example Answers

- *Before hearing about TeBeVAT, I hadn't thought about informal or lifelong learning."*
- *"Yes, I thought about it, because in my opinion stagnation means regression."*
- *"Yes – I know that informal learning is a topic in education circles and I believe lifelong learning will be important in the future. But before hearing about TeBeVAT I hadn't thought about it much."*
- *"Yes. I think that this encourages motivation in some people. To evolve with these new self-acquired skills, skill and knowledge. Other persons or companies are also looking for qualifications without an official certificate."*
- *I did not realise that I knew so many things.*
- *"Yes I understand. It triggers awareness of how many things I learned myself."*

Understanding of the TeBeVAT Process and the LLDT

We asked whether they understood the TeBeVAT process and knew what they had to do. The job of the candidates was to fill in the self-evaluation and collect evidences from their

records, like documents, pictures videos, references etc. that prove what they said about themselves. They well understood how to do the self-evaluation and the process in general. Only two persons expressed doubt about the appropriateness of the procedure. One important aspect that was named, was the support of the mentor. Many candidates would not have gotten well along without his expertise and support. This underlines what we have emphasized in the checklist mentor. We believe he is the main touch point for the candidate. He supports the self-reflection and helps with problems of understanding. He needs to be well selected and qualified, only in that way the candidate may benefit from it. Three candidates expressed that they think the process may be too complex and said: *"keep it simple"*. There were minor language difficulties while filling the self-evaluation out, because in our pilot study, all documents, explanations and files were only available in English language. Of course, we will provide it in other languages as well and the competence list, which was already translated into Italian and German by us. There was one important remark. The Italian language does not clearly differentiate between mentor, assessor and advisor. Still they believed it is good and necessary to have a person as support for the candidate. There were some uncertainties because it is still a pilot study with a few shortcomings, but in general they said, they still understand the core idea and intention. See blue box below.

Example Answers

- *"Documentation with paper and pen, analysis of what I have done, in which areas I am sure, in which areas I'm not so sure. I believe that on this way one can find out his competencies."*
- *"Yes, I understood the self-evaluation and thought it was pretty good. I didn't have time to get any records together and send them."*
- *"Yes but it is a bit complex and if you are not familiar with the terminology and relations it seems a little bit confusing on the first look. Together with the Mentor I've got a good overview of the TeBeVAT process."*
- *"I understood the process, but I am not sure if it is an appropriate procedure."*
- *"No, the system was comprehensive."*
- *"It's a pilot with some shortcoming. But I got the purpose of it."*
- *"K. I. S. / Hou het simpel (=keep it simple)"*
- *"Yes, I understand."*
- *"Advisor, Assessor, Mentor: in Italy meanings are not so clear! Anyway mentor is necessary and very useful for the whole process."*

Time Investment and Expenditure

Our candidates understood the process and the LLDT. But how much time did it cost them? What is the expenditure to fill in the LLDT, against the background of a perceived complex process? In general, it showed that the expenditure is rather high, and the competence list a bit too long. They said the amount of data requested was too high. In consequence we found that many candidates did not get around to gather much evidence on their competences because they simply said they didn't have time. Even though they were really interested to see how it would have been evaluated. A little experience, a good introduction and a more stable excel file would well help to reduce the effort. Three persons thought the effort to be alright. How you see it depends on the balance with what you can get out of it. Example answer can again be found in the blue box.

Example Answers

- *"It is very extensive."*
- *"No, very comprehensive list, maybe a bit too big."*
- *"Maybe it is worth to re-think the requested amount of data in the form."*
- *"Took an hour in total, if I knew the system it would have been quicker."*
- *"I didn't get around to provide records of this – but I think it would be interesting to see how the records are evaluated."*
- *"Didn't take too long, about 10 minutes. Would have been quicker if the excel was more stable."*
- *"I honestly do not believe in success of gathering information's in the described expected amount, this is too much to learn from it – in addition not everything can be shared due compliance reasons."*

The Competences

We were also interested to gather opinions about the competence list contained in the LLDT. Especially the level of detail was a point that we wanted to explore. Mostly they were received good. The field of event-technology covers a big range of jobs and tasks. Therefore, in some points it could be little more specific to the job and a little less focused on theater. But they were relative to the peoples working experiences in general. We also asked, if in their opinion, any important competences we missing. Mainly social skills and interpersonal skills, like networking or teamwork are missing in the list. In one answer we found also an aspect of intercultural understanding because a lot of times, a stage- and event technician will have to work with artists or colleagues abroad. In the TeBeVAT team, we had intensive discussions about how these rather soft-skills could be assessed correctly without touching the area of personality psychology too deep. What we called "attitude" is

surely is important and should be considered further in the development of the process. For examples, see the blue box.

Example Answers

- *"Yes, I thought the competences offered were fairly precise and good. Some, like "props" have little to do with my work. I thought the pull-down menu possibilities were good. Perhaps there should be a "commentary" cell for the candidate in order to clarify details."*
- *"Yes, I think the idea is good - especially defining competences in that way. Sometimes I thought the competences provided in the self-evaluation could be more specific. Some were, others were not."*
- *"Could we add networking skills?"*
- *"Social skills: with artist, technicians in own country, technician abroad."*
- *"No – I thought the list of competences was relative to my working experience."*
- *"Team Work"*
- *"Social Skills"*

The Levels of the Self-Evaluation

In addition to the level of detail in the competences, we asked about the gradations in the dropdown menu to score the level of mastery. These were based on a scoring rubrics system, common in the Anglo-American education literature. They are intended to give an anchor point of a good answer, or in our case a good mastery of a task or a bad mastery of a task. Most candidates thought the four levels to be appropriate and it helped them understand what is expected of a competence. One person each thought them to be too detailed and one person not detailed enough. There were some minor insecurities because one they stumbled over the expressions "feeling competent" and "I am more than able to". Alternatively, the team discussed whether to use a rating scale that asks for agreement of a statement. It would say something similar to: "Do you feel competent in executing the described task?" The test of the alternative is still to be done. Answers can be found in the blue box below.

Example Answers

- *"Yes, good to have that detailed "I believe I know how to do" vs. "I exactly know how to do that"*
- *"Yes, I believe the 4 possible choices make it very easy to work with the self-evaluation."*

- *"Yes, it is good to be asked the question. However, it should include being comfortable at it rather not competent."*

The Technical Implementation of the LLDT

The most outstanding result that we obtained in the interviews concerns the current implementation with an excel file. As already mentioned in the introduction, our goal is to have an online-database solution for TeBeVAT to move away from the excel. Currently we use a form in which the candidates fill in the self-evaluation. In another sheet, the mentor can easily enter his judgment of the quality of the evidence that the candidate brought afterwards. It then highlights points which are open for discussion and that may be examined more closely in discussion and feedback rounds with the candidate. The candidate's agreed all that this is not a solutions of choice. The file is hard to handle, has bugs and there is danger of losing the data overall by accidentally overwriting it. Skipping from page to page does trigger reflection but the expenditure is high to complete excel. See the answers in the blue box.

Example Answers

- *"Bugged program, hard to use."*
- *"It sound like a great idea, if it is easier to do. The excel document is a bit overwhelming."*
- *"Yes, it was a bit unclear on the software, but the idea is good."*
- *"The excel document is complicated and difficult to use."*
- *"The sequence from page to page did trigger ideas, but the system was hard to use."*

Implementation of an Online Database or App solution

Last, we asked them what they think about the idea of implementing an online or app solution of the database instead. The idea was well perceived, and candidates found it useful. Several aspects have to be considered in the implementation: data privacy, interfaces to other platforms and job markets and usability. Usability and data privacy seem critical for the acceptance of the platform. Links to job markets and the possibility to link employers and candidates should be created. If it was implemented with consideration of these aspects, it could be a great result. See answers in the blue box below.

Example Answers

- *"It would be great to have an online-database with records of my work experience, if the data protection is good. I think it would be a good tool for employers to see what I can do."*
- *I think it could change the way people see our work environment – especially if there was a link to social media. It could be a good way to look up for job opportunities. It needs good data protection policies or it won't be used."*
- *"Yes, I can imagine that. In the age of smartphone and internet, it's the only solution that makes sense. However one should ensure that the information is also qualified."*
- *"Yes, very useful an online-database. But also with market links and proposals, visibility."*

Discussion

Summary of Results

Overall, our results promote a positive image of TeBeVAT. The general idea is well liked. It could bridge the gap between (in terms of formal education!) unskilled professionals and employers. With TeBeVAT, the identification and documentation of learning outcomes is possible. This would give especially young stage- and event technicians something at hand to prove what they are capable of doing, even though they missed the change to grow on formal education. It has the potential to motivate them to continuously evaluate their own learnings and grow on them. With TeBeVAT their competences would become visible to employers on the job market if added to their online profile. With TeBeVAT these competences are really proven and formally verified. It could in the future even become a tool for personal selection.

The candidates mostly thought the process is appropriate and suiting to identity and document informal learning results. It adds value to them and helps them to get a full picture of their capabilities and strengths and weaknesses. Interpersonal and social skills should be added because they are important for the job. The tool should be provided in more languages so that it can be filled out in the native language of the candidate. It allows for a European alignment and is useful seen against the background of high mobility. It proved to be the case because many of our candidates reported working experience abroad in at least one different country. The current categories that describe the level of mastery seem overall adequate and understandable. The time expenditure is rather high, which might be partly based on the excel file that proved to be hard to handle.

Implications

Research from the University of Maastrich (De grip, 2015) in the Netherlands highlights the importance of informal learning at work. It contributes more to the performance of a worker than formal learning. At the same time „the skills acquired through informal learning in one firm are less evident to other employers than those acquired through formal training.“ Seen in this context it must be a clear goal to trigger awareness and highlight the importance of informal learning result. Even the European Commission has issued a recommendation to implement procedures and strategies to validate outcomes of non-formal and informal learning. TeBeVAT offers a strategy to do so in the area of event-technology and sure is a helpful process. TeBeVAT should not just stop at being an idea but be brought forward and be pushed.

Both sides, the employers and the working professionals should be aware that not only formal education counts and leads to high performance in the job. This worked quite well with the TeBeVAT process – the candidates discovered new competences and saw the importance of even small things. The things you do in your leisure time, are also relevant for continuous, lifelong learning. TeBeVAT helps to identify and document competences to future employers in a reliable and verifiable way. This would be an extraordinary convincing feature of database solution, if it gave room for visibility of competences and offers a platform also for employers. The competences in the Lifelong Learning Document Tool are based on the ESCO database. It was put a lot of effort in this database in order to establish transparency in the European job market and national qualifications. Therefore, TeBeVAT is in line with the European idea of the strategy 2020 to reduce unemployment, allow movement and qualify especially young workers.

Outlook on The Future

The results of the expert interviews clearly highlighted two things: working with a self-evaluation supported by an experienced mentor seems appropriate. Using an excel file to collect this data seems not to be a good solution. The current format of an Excel file is not user-friendly and stable enough to record learnings. Storage on a local computer may hold many uncertainties and risks of complete loss of the portfolio due to technical errors or problems (like a virus and crash of the computer). The only future-oriented solution that exists is an online platform or an app. For the implementation of the database, several aspects need to be considered: Data protection and quality, usability, interfaces and visibility. Only if the candidates feel their personal data and learning history is kept safe, they will be willing to use it. As we stated in the TeBeVAT process overview, the candidate needs to hold the control and be able to actively decide what data to share or not. The database should help candidates to become visible on the job market and show prospective employers with their competence profile what they are able to do. The other way around, it should offer access to job advertisements or offer employers the possibility to actively

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seek for candidates with a suiting profile. The solution should be accessible on mobile devices and provide interfaces to several other applications, like social media or learning platforms. In line with the thought of lifelong learning it should be possible to continuously update the profile and link new experiences.

During the project's runtime, the team had intensive discussion about how to assess best the competence evaluation. We couldn't agree whether to use a standard rating scale, a widely spread instrument in psychometrics and quantitative questionnaire studies, or a rubrics approach with descriptive scoring categories commonly used in the education and pedagogical area. In the future, comparative study of different instruments for the self-evaluation should be done. The focus should be on what best supports the candidates in their self-evaluation. What answer categories or rating statements produce the most realistic and reliable results when comparing the self-image and outer perspective. In this validation phase, we tested the rubrics approach. We have some evidence that seems in favor of scoring rubrics as they provide candidates an anchor point for their evaluation. But we have no data about rating scales nor real indicators of performance to compare them to. So currently at the moment this cannot be answered.

Overall, we are really eager to push this project further and implement improvements based on the results in this analysis.