



EFFECTS OF THE EUROPEAN PROJECT MOB4APP STRENGTHENING VET PROFESSIONALS FOR PROMOTING CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY IN APPRENTICESHIPS FROM THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. The presented article focuses on the effects of an international project from the perspective of employee development. Through the analysis of implemented project activities, an attempt was made to show the positive impact of long-term professional internships on professional as well as personal development. The purpose of the article is to promote the effects of the project and present the opportunities for employees, created by foreign internships.

EFEKTY EUROPEJSKIEGO PROJEKTU MOB4APP STRENGTHENING
VET PROFESSIONALS FOR PROMOTING CROSS-BORDER MOBILITY
IN APPRENTICESHIPS W PERSPEKTYWIE ROZWOJU PRACOWNIKÓW

Słowa kluczowe: rozwój zawodowy, staże długoterminowe, kompetencje, umiejętności, rynek pracy

Streszczenie. W prezentowanym artykule skoncentrowano się na efektach międzynarodowego projektu w perspektywie rozwoju pracowników. Poprzez analizę zrealizowanych działań projektowych podjęto próbę ukazania pozytywnego oddziaływania długoterminowych staży zawodowych na rozwój zawodowy, a także osobisty. Celem artykułu jest promocja efektów projektu i przedstawienie możliwości, jakie dla pracowników tworzy mobilność zagraniczna.

Introduction

A person's professional development is conditioned by numerous individual factors, but it is also directly linked to the work environment. When addressing the issue of professional development, significant importance should be assigned to the organisation, the workplace as an institution, which should support the development of its employees (see Gerlach, 2014, p. 4). In the perspective of ubiquitous changes, which are also visible in the job market, it becomes essential to pay attention to the opportunities and prospects that create for workers the chance to acquire new knowledge, skills, and competencies. Along with numerous transformations taking place in the professional, cultural, and social spheres, there arises the necessity to create new educational and training spaces, which will allow employees, school graduates, students, and pupils to gain experience by participating in diverse forms of education and training using new technologies.

The aim of this article is to present the results of a European project from the perspective of employees' professional development. Undoubtedly, long-term foreign internships, which were the subject of the project's activities, can constitute a significant element in the development of employees and employers in the intercultural job market.

Employee development – an introduction to the project theme

The concept of development in contemporary times is embedded in various areas of human life. Development is directly linked to family, private, professional, and social life. Professional activity is one of the fundamental and dominant life activities of a person, impacting all the spheres of existence. The quality of work affects a person's private life, not only in the economic aspect, hence the importance of creating conditions for professional development by both employers and employees themselves. As Ryszard Gerlach notes, 'The individual development of employees is primarily about investing in their qualifications. The process of professional development of employees begins from the moment they start working in the company and ends with their departure [...]. The organisation of employee development is a derivative of the company's staffing needs: an instrumental expression of planning employee development is a tool called a professional career path plan' (Gerlach, 2014, p. 4). Therefore,

caring for an employee's professional development is not only the responsibility of the individual; it also rests on the employer, who should create conditions and space enabling education and the enhancement of skills and competencies in the workplace. Employees possessing high qualifications, competencies, and practical skills related to knowledge constitute the capital of companies, allowing them to be competitive in the market. The development of employees, as Adam Suchodolski (2010, p. 727) emphasises, is 'a component of every concept of human resource management.' It is necessary to invest in the resources a company possesses; opportunities must be created to acquire new skills and competencies, which will contribute to the development of the work environment. Significant importance in the professional development of employees should be attributed to formal education, which forms the basis, and then to non-formal and informal education, through which a person – thanks to various activities – gains experience and shapes practical skills, enabling better functioning in the job market. At this point, it must be emphasised that formal education requires updating over time, as the rapid pace of change necessitates continuous further education. People nowadays must be participants in lifelong education, through which their full participation in social life becomes possible. According to Stefan M. Kwiatkowski (2014, p. 25), "We are therefore observers, and sometimes participants, in the process of integrating formal education (first – basic education) with the supporting non-formal and informal education".

The changes taking place in contemporary times are strongly evident in the job market. The need to keep up with technological, informational, and cultural progress essentially forms the basis for undertaking new developmental activities, which will enable employees, as well as companies, to acquire competencies for the future. One of the opportunities that allow them to enhance their competitiveness, shape their professional career, and achieve multifaceted development, are long-term foreign internships¹.

The promotion and enhancement of knowledge regarding long-term foreign internships were the focus of the project's activities. It was observed that these trips, despite being an excellent opportunity for acquiring new skills and competencies, are not common among employees. Additionally, companies are often reluctant to become organisations hosting interns. Consequently, the implemented project concentrated on raising awareness and knowledge about foreign

¹ For the purposes of the project undertaken, it has been assumed that long-term professional internship lasts a minimum of three months.

mobility. As indicated by the literature on the subject, foreign mobility aimed at education² allows for the development of soft, language, and professional skills (for more details, see Dąbrowska-Resiak, Jeżowski, Pachocki, 2018, pp. 132-165). As the contemporary labour market is characterised by significant variability and high expectations of employees, as well as of employers and companies that must adapt to ongoing changes, investing in human capital, which determines the efficiency of organisations, becomes critically important. The necessity of lifelong education implies that employees must engage in activities and initiatives that allow for development and improvement, enabling them to function effectively in the labour market and to be of significant value to employers and colleagues. “Qualifications and professional competencies, continually supplemented, updated, and adapted to changing realities, meeting the needs of the employer, constitute a kind of work tool for the employee, a tool of the highest market value” (Tomaszewska-Lipiec, 2012, pp. 69-70).

The necessity of continuous professional development of employees aligns with the concept of lifelong learning and is a response to the civilisational changes that occur rapidly in the process of globalisation. Through participation in various forms of professional education, it is possible to acquire skills, knowledge, and competencies that are essential resources for the contemporary worker. In the context of the discussed issue, it is important to highlight the significance of foreign mobility, which can enable employees and employers to function more effectively in an intercultural labour market. Long-term professional internships can be a crucial component of professional development, allowing for collaboration in an evolving world.

The premises of the discussed European project

The European project under discussion, *Mob4App Strengthening VET professionals for promoting cross-border mobility in apprenticeships*, was focused on the professional development of employees who, in various sectors of the economy, public administration, education, and private companies, are involved in promoting and implementing long-term professional internships. The project was implemented in 2020-2022 and funded under the Erasmus+ strategic partnership programme. It aimed to support the foreign mobility of employees

² Educational mobility within the framework of long-term international internships does not solely encompass pupils or students but also includes employees from various sectors.

and students in Europe. The Mob4App's assumptions concentrated on providing VET³ specialists, employees, employers, and students with specific knowledge, skills, and competencies essential in promoting, managing, and organising foreign mobility for interns. The project was conducted on two tracks: initially, it focused on specialists, teachers, career advisors, and office employees involved in organising international internships; subsequently, it concentrated on employees, students, companies sending their staff on long-term internships, and entrepreneurs hosting interns. A holistic approach to the problem of disseminating and promoting long-term internships allowed reaching a diverse group of recipients, who perceive professional internships and their conditions from various perspectives.

According to the project's design assumptions, trained VET specialists will be capable of designing, developing, and delivering specific knowledge related to employee internships. Through training, they will acquire skills and competencies enabling them to identify and overcome the most common issues associated with the practical implementation of long-term employee mobility in Europe. The Mob4App project aimed to strengthen the role of VET specialists – as a link between interns/trainees and companies – by developing a training pathway for VET specialists and supportive materials for companies and interns/trainees/employees interested in mobility. The project was targeted at VET teachers and trainers as the main audience, while interns and companies were the end beneficiaries.

The discussed project was carried out by partners from Italy, Belgium, Poland, Spain, Germany, and the Netherlands. The project's implementers were:

- **Co.Meta Srl** – an Italian VET organisation certified in the Marche region, specialising in the implementation of innovative training methodologies, formal and informal education, particularly in recognising competencies acquired through activities within the latter category. This organisation creates and implements training programmes aimed at enhancing the practical skills of employees and integrating innovations into companies (more information is available on their website: www.consorziocometa.it);

- **La Camera di Commercio Belgio-Italiana [The Belgian-Italian Chamber of Commerce]** is a non-profit association established in 1950; it serves as a reference point *par excellence* for any company wishing to promote its activities and expand its network in Italy and Belgium. The Belgian-Italian

³ Vocational education and training.

Chamber of Commerce was the partner responsible for the dissemination strategy of the Mob4App project (more information can be found on their website: www.ccitabel.com);

– **CISL Marche** – a regional branch of the Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL; Italian Confederation of Workers' Trade Unions), which has over 162,000 members (CISL is the second largest trade union confederation in Italy). The organisation was founded on workers' initiative and operates independently; its activities are based on negotiations aimed at improving the economic and social conditions of workers and retirees (more information can be found on their website: www.cislmarche.it);

– **La Cámara de Comercio de España [Spanish Chamber of Commerce]** is a corporation that focuses on representing, promoting, and defending the fundamental interests of commerce, industry, services, and shipping. The chamber conducts labour market research and provides advisory services for public administration; it acts as their representative in national and international governing bodies (more information can be found on their website: www.camara.es);

– **Berlink ETN GmbH** is a German organisation with extensive experience in organising vocational, educational, and internship programmes in Berlin. It closely collaborates with companies and entrepreneurs engaged in international mobility. The organisation is part of the ETN Network, along with other training agencies in Italy (Rimini), Spain (Malaga), Bulgaria (Sofia), the United Kingdom (Portsmouth), and Ireland (Cork) (more information can be found on their website: www.berlink.eu);

– **Stichting Kenniscentrum PRO WORK** – focuses on promoting the career development of workers from various economic sectors, implementing innovative solutions in vocational education and training. Its activities centre on coaching, training, and career counselling for individuals at risk of exclusion from the labour market (more information can be found on their website: www.pro-work.nl);

– **Uniwersytet Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie [The University of the National Education Commission in Kraków]** is a higher education institution that conducts research in the fields of labour pedagogy and the labour market. It offers students the latest advancements in humanities, social sciences, pedagogy, natural sciences, technical studies, and arts. The educational offer allows candidates to apply for dozens of first-, second-, and third-cycle degree programs, as well as postgraduate studies (more information can be found on their website: www.up.krakow.pl).

The leader of the project was Co.Meta Srl, with the other institutions acting as project partners. The international project team consisted of 12 individuals, among whom the leader role was held by a representative from Italy.

Leaders, along with their partners, were responsible for adapting the project's outcomes to the labour market conditions in each country, promoting the project, acquiring beneficiaries, and engaging entrepreneurs who would implement the created tools in their companies' operations. To ensure the project met the real needs of the market, focus groups were established, and representatives of employers, workers, labour pedagogues, career advisors, tutors, and coaches were invited to collaborate. These individuals served as ambassadors and experts, assessing the emerging project results.

Tools focused on promoting long-term international internships – project outcomes

The Mob4App project aimed to strengthen the role of VET specialists (representatives of employment offices and labour markets, mentors, guardians, coaches, who deal with, among other things, employee internships) in creating and promoting long-term international internships. It was assumed that individuals responsible for organising internships and employee trips could act as a link between potential interns and hosting companies; it was only necessary to enable them to enhance their knowledge and create an international support network, which would facilitate the acquisition of foreign entrepreneurs who could become hosting companies for employees.

The intended objectives of the project were achieved by developing a training pathway and materials that promote, support, and facilitate the organisation of international employee mobility. The majority of official documents and recommendations from the European Commission confirm the existence of a discrepancy between the benefits of long-term professional internships and the quality of professional competencies needed to implement this practice effectively (Broek, Cino Pagliarello, de Vreede-Van Noort, Vroonhof, 2017).

In response to the emerging demand for specialist training, a 32-hour training course (IO1, LTMA) was created for individuals who, within their work, assigned functions, and professional tasks, are responsible for long-term internships. The training programme is consistent with ECVET, EQF, and EQA-VET standards, ensuring the functional acquisition of knowledge, skills, and

competencies necessary for promoting, organising, and supporting effective experiences related to practices abroad.

The training programme designed for VET specialists consisted of 7 modules, encompassing extended knowledge in the field of long-term professional internships. The topics of the training modules were developed based on interviews with focus groups and were adapted to the conditions of international mobility of the participating countries. The contents of the individual modules included:

- Module 1: Identifying needs and benefits for intern-employees and companies; the procedure for implementing long-term mobility in a national context;
- Module 2: Legal foundations;
- Module 3: The procedure for implementing long-term mobility in an international context;
- Module 4: Managing long-term internships and vocational practices;
- Module 5: Financing and administration;
- Module 6: Mediation and intercultural communication;
- Module 7: Tools and strategies for promotion.

The first international training programme was conducted by the German partners from 27th September 2021 to 1st October 2021. The course was attended by 14 participants from all the partner countries.

The training programme was developed in 7 languages. It was designed as a standalone document that can be used by trainers, organisations, and any institutions interested in organising training to increase interest in long-term mobility among interns⁴.

The second outcome of the project activities was the IO2 Toolkit – a toolkit for interns and companies, designed to provide knowledge and useful information helpful in the application process. This document consists of 3 parts:

- Part I: A toolkit for both hosting companies and interns; this document aims to fill the information gap and provide practical tools for companies and interns, delivering essential information and guidance useful in organising and implementing long-term mobility;
- Part II: A toolkit for companies; this development responds to the information gaps present in many companies and schools. Research conducted within the project showed that many companies and schools, acting as

⁴ The training programme in Polish can be downloaded from the website: https://www.mob4app.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/IO1-Training-programme-final_PL.pdf (7.01.2024).

sending or hosting organisations for interns, are unaware of how to support trainees before, during, and after mobility. In the Toolkit, companies will find detailed information on how to prepare step-by-step for receiving or sending their employees for internships;

- Part III: A toolkit for interns; despite the numerous benefits associated with long-term international internships, only a small number of employees/students have participated in such trips. Studies indicate that long-term mobility positively impacts the professional, personal, and social skills of interns. The toolkit prepared for those planning to take advantage of long-term internships aims to provide the necessary knowledge and useful information to streamline the preparatory process and avoid the most common mistakes.

The final outcome of the completed project was an online training course (IO3 MOOC) for VET specialists. It provides knowledge about long-term mobility, is available in 7 language versions on an online platform,⁵ and consists of 7 thematic modules containing lessons, quizzes, individual tasks, tests, and study materials. The individual modules cover the following topics:

- Module 1: Relates to long-term international internships in the context of labour pedagogy and the development of employees and companies; this module presents long-term mobility as a developmental opportunity for the employee, employer, and hosting institution;
- Module 2: Focuses on the legal foundations of international mobility; it discusses European recommendations and legal procedures, as well as specific European regulations concerning the organisation of long-term internships;
- Module 3: Pertains to the key entities involved in long-term professional internships;
- Module 4: Is related to the management of long-term international internships; it addresses the issues of multiculturalism, educational environments, mentoring, and tutoring;
- Module 5: Deals with administrative and financial procedures;
- Module 6: Relates to communication and mediation; in this module, trainees will find information on solving problems within a team, risk

⁵ The course can be completed by logging in on the website: <https://mob4app-polish-mooc.thinkific.com/courses/polish-mob4app-mooc> (7.01.2024).

management, and will learn about digital communication tools and how to use them in promoting long-term professional internships;

- Module 7: Directly relates to marketing methods and techniques that can be applied to promote international mobility.

Although the MOOC is intended for individuals who regularly organise long-term professional internships, its accessibility and format allow all interested parties to undertake the course.

All the outcomes of the project are publicly available⁶ and can be accessed free of charge, enabling individuals to expand their knowledge and skills. As demonstrated by pilot studies, focus group meetings, and substantive research, there is a significant demand in the workplace for increasing knowledge about the opportunities provided by long-term professional internships, which can be an essential element of professional development.

Opportunities for employee development in the perspective of long-term international internships⁷

As previously discussed, investing in the professional development of employees is a significant responsibility for both employees and employers. Undoubtedly, creating opportunities for international mobility can be an essential developmental element, offering an educational space. The results of the implemented project help to increase awareness about long-term internships and their positive impact on personal and professional development.

International internships enable trainees and companies to become acquainted with new ways of thinking and organizing work. They encourage the development of valuable skills and enhance other qualities that can significantly impact holistic development, including self-esteem, confidence, and adaptability. Moreover, new relationships between schools, companies, and individuals are often a source of innovation. Long-term international internships are one of the means to elevate qualification levels and enhance the competitive positioning of European economies.

An international professional internship demonstrates initiative and a willingness to embrace challenges, and the fact that someone has spent time abroad

⁶ The project results are available for download from the website: <https://www.mob4app.eu/wyniki/> (7.01.2024).

⁷ This paragraph has been developed based on the research findings from focus groups in the countries implementing the discussed project. The contents herein are reflected in I03.

suggests they are capable of handling themselves in an intercultural environment. These skills are valued by most employers. While working in a foreign country, participants are likely to acquire skills they would not have gained through training programmes in their home country. An overseas stay broadens their horizons, exposes them to new cultures, helps them learn languages, share knowledge, and ultimately become better employees. Immersion in a multicultural context allows for the appreciation of diversity and gaining a perspective on the world from a different viewpoint, fostering an open mind for tolerance and sharing. Intern-employees enhance their personal development skills, which are the traits and abilities that help them grow in both their personal and professional lives. Improving these skills can help maximize their potential. Being in a different professional environment and stepping out of their comfort zone facilitates personal growth, translating into work efficiency.

International experience is also a fundamental tool for developing professional skills, as interns can acquire both technical and soft skills that help them navigate the modern job market. Soft skills are non-technical skills that are incredibly valuable because they apply across almost every industry, sometimes referred to as transferable skills. These skills are relevant to a wide range of professions and sectors and form the foundation for developing the hard skills and abilities needed to succeed in the labour market. Communication skills, teamwork, problem-solving, learning, planning, and organizing are considered important by most employers.

Regarding technical knowledge and skills related to efficiently performing specific professional tasks, although they depend on the characteristics and specifics of the job, a long-term internship abroad can be a way to acquire new, specific skills. Newly acquired knowledge about services and products can turn interns into experts, and they may even have the chance to bring truly innovative ideas and concepts related to their workplace, as well as market-available products and services, from abroad.

In an era of increasing globalization, the ability to speak at least one foreign language is significant, especially in workplaces with multicultural teams. Language learning is the most obvious outcome of learning within international mobility and, due to the increasing internationalization of every field, one of the skills most frequently required by employers in Europe. Despite language education in schools and universities, nothing increases confidence in using a foreign language like the experience gained abroad. It makes the difference between learners and actual users of the language. Even if the primary language

in project activities is English (or another common language), participants inevitably acquire basic skills (or more advanced, depending on the individual) in the language used in the host country and develop important intercultural communication skills, which come to the fore in interactions with people from different backgrounds. Language skills also include non-verbal communication in that language. Compared to their peers who learn foreign languages in their home country, mobility project participants have more experience in deciphering facial expressions, gestures, and body language and are more culturally sensitive.

In the context of the completed project and research in focus groups and pilot studies, intercultural skills and opportunities related to expanding the horizons of interns are also significant. While living abroad, internship participants “experience” the host country and its culture and become acquainted with various economic and social contexts. They have the opportunity to learn about, sometimes entirely different, ways of life. Upon returning, participants are more sensitive to cultural differences and the challenges faced by others, and they perceive differently those who travel abroad. Additionally, interns become more aware of their own culture: they reflect on where they come from and their identity in relation to local, national, and even global dynamics. Furthermore, they can apply a form of relativism, being able to explain the main differences and appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of their own culture from a foreigner’s perspective. This is perceived as a key factor in European citizenship and, more broadly, social cohesion in Europe.

The experience of international mobility introduces participants to new dynamics and allows them to develop certain skills. It encourages participants to abandon their daily habits and step out of their comfort zone by modifying routines. Openness to the world, to other people, and their differences undoubtedly forms the foundation of citizenship, community awareness, and European identity.

Conclusions

Based on the implemented project, it is evident how many positive aspects associated with development come with participating in a long-term professional trip abroad. In the context of the discussed issue, both employees and employers should undertake actions that will allow the creation of international networks for exchanging experiences and best practices. The project revealed certain gaps that require further improvement and modification, so that long-term

professional internships can be realized by a larger number of people. A significant role in the development of professional internships should be attributed to those professionally involved in organizing mobility, who should serve as knowledge transmitters and, in a way, become connectors between companies and interns. Therefore, enhancing the qualifications and knowledge level, and providing new working tools to those who professionally organize and prepare for professional internships, will allow for the effective promotion of the idea of international mobility in the job market, which in turn will contribute to creating a developmental space for employees and contemporary companies.

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