

THE EVALUATION OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM IN SOCIAL WORK. USING SWOT ANALYSIS AS AN EVALUATION METHOD

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Abstract: *This paper presents the partial results of evaluation for a professional development program, created for social workers from the Social Service of Hospice “House of Hope” Brasov, Romania. In the final evaluation stage, we have used several methods and instruments to identify the efficiency of the program and to find ways to improve it. One of them was the SWOT analysis, through which we intend to identify the strengths and limitations of the program implemented. SWOT analysis was filled out by both the specialists participating in the professional development program and the lecturers who have held the working sessions. The partial results of the final evaluation have revealed that the program developed has achieved its goals and met the expectations of the participants and those identified at the managerial level.*

Key words: *professional development, evaluation of a program in social work, SWOT analysis.*

1. Introduction

Developing a career in the social assistance field is a relatively new and rarely approached subject in public institutions and non-profit organisations in Romania, particularly because of the rarity of available financial resources for this type of programs meant to provide both professional and personal development for the employees. We are referring to developing a career within a framework created by the European Union, which states that education, shaping the future work force and the efficient investment in human capital are “*key components necessary to insure high levels of sustainable economic growth, based on knowledge and employment service, but also to face the complex challenges of today’s economy*” (INCSMPS, 2014, p.6).

Career development refers to the evolution of social workers within an organization, according to its needs and depending on the employees’ individual performance, potential and aspirations. This important dimension requires an open mind and sustained effort not

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just from the top and middle management of the organization, but also from the staff involved in providing social services, important for both the individual and the organization he is a part of.

In addition, it should be noted that it generates multiple positive effects - an efficient professional development of the staff satisfies the needs for institutional, occupational, professional and personal development.

The present article contains a concise description of the methods and instruments used in the evaluation stage of a professional development program designed for the specialists within the Social Service of Hospice "House of Hope" in Brasov County - an organization which offers health services for people suffering from incurable diseases in advanced stages. In addition, we have presented the partial results of the evaluation, obtained through SWOT analysis.

2. Paper theoretical foundation and related literature

Career evolution depends on a particular set of skills a social worker needs in order to perform his activities at a higher and higher responsibility level or to contribute to the organization's development. These skills are made up by the behavioural characteristics needed for a person to perform his activities efficiently, irrespective of the job they occupy or the level at which they find themselves in their career.

Career development requires two separate components, one of them being career training. By improving abilities and work techniques, career training allows employees to use their assets better and it also increases their level of work satisfaction. The second component is professional development, whose objective is to provide employees with the needed skillset to cope with the demands of their current position, as well as a future one (Fărcăşanu and Moldovan, 2000).

Among the advantages of developing your career we should list increased productivity and a higher quality of performed activities, as well as improved skills in the use of new technology, an increased work satisfaction and a decrease in the need for supervision. This implies that, before creating any supervision program, it is necessary to develop and implement a continual training and professional development program.

The Copenhagen Declaration regarding the strengthening of European cooperation for education and career training (November 29-30 2002) addresses, among others, the increased level of information, orientation and counselling, as well as the transparency of education and professional training, the development of instruments used to acknowledge and mutually validate skills and qualifications and the improvement in assured quality of education and professional development.

(http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/policy/vocational-policy/doc/copenhagen-declaration_en.pdf).

In order to have quality social assistance services, as well as satisfied employees and clients, we need to have constant quality improvement programs within the organizations. Bódi (2007a) states that the constant improvement of quality in the social assistance field implies:

- quality results - that means, first and foremost, the satisfaction of the clients' current necessities as well as being prepared for new ones;
- the monitoring of the results, a process that is both retrospective and prospective;

- assuring quality is not just the responsibility of a person or a department, it is the responsibility of the entire organization;
- quality and assuring quality should be focused on both the process and the results.

In their first stage, professional development programs should answer the following question posed by specialists: Am I doing it right? On this level, an intervention should assure the proper conditions for:

- continuity - the level of coordination over time that different interventions conducted by different specialists have;
- efficiency - the level of efficiency that the service has, depending on the level of current knowledge in the field, and with the purpose of reaching the desired results for the intended beneficiary;
- care and respect - the level of involvement of the client in the decision to be part of a particular intervention - the provided service must be tailored for different people and it must have the right level of sensibility and respect that the client needs
- safety - the measure in which the risks of the intervention are as low as possible for the client, as well as everyone else, including the providers of social services
- opportunity - the measure in which the service is provided for the intended client at the most opportune moment (Dragomirișteanu and Pop, 2000).

The objectives and themes proposed within these programs can improve abilities, which in turn will lead to an increase in quality for the services offered by social workers.

3. Methodology

The program implemented within the Hospice “House of Hope” in Brasov was created after an initiative of the foundation’s management who foresaw the need to implement both supervision and continual training courses to answer the solicitations of social workers for professional and personal development. In order to achieve these objectives, over the course of 18 months, we had work sessions on diverse topics that we identified, analysed and categorized in order of importance along with social workers within the organization: the internal and external communication of the organization, communicating with difficult clients, decision making, stress management, time management, the management of crisis situations (ethical dilemmas and the ways to solve them, communicating unpleasant news), the research layout in the social work field, as well as the ways in which the results obtained through research could be shared.

At the end of the professional development program, we also conducted an evaluation with the following objectives:

- i. To determine what can be classified as main needs for professional and personal development according to the social workers from palliative care
- ii. To recognize the current issues regarding supervision in social work in Brasov, Romania.
- iii. To evaluate the performance of the program by analysing the content presented by two lecturers and a psychotherapist for the social workers from Hospice “House of Hope”, Brasov, Romania.

The final assessment involved applying some instruments to identify the efficiency of the program for professional development and finding ways to improve it. Therefore, we applied the SWOT analysis, through which we aimed to identify the strengths and limits of the program that was carried out by both the specialists who attended the professional

development program, as well as the lecturers who did work sessions alongside the professionals. In the second stage of the evaluation, we carried out a semi-structured group interview with all of the social workers who attended the professional development program, which we recorded and transcribed. Within this article, we will present the partial results of the evaluation of our program that we obtained through SWOT analysis.

This partial data was gathered from the experiences of six individuals who participated in a professional group development program, conducted by three universities within a metropolitan area in Brasov County, Romania. All of the lecturers have worked on this program as volunteers. The participants in this group program were social workers at the Foundation Hospice “House of Hope” in Brasov, Romania.

SWOT analysis is a very simple process which can offer a very profound understanding of potential and critical problems. The main purpose of SWOT analysis is identifying each factor, positive or negative, and placing it in one of the four categories. This allows us to have a more objective perspective on the career training program: (Bódi, 2007b).

The SWOT analysis has two important dimensions:

- the analysis of internal factors, meaning strengths and weaknesses;
- the analysis of external factors, represented by the opportunities and threats that the organization faces

Strengths refer to internal, positive, tangible and intangible attributes of the program. These are under our control. The questions posed are: What did I do right? What resources did I have? What were the advantages?

Weaknesses refer to those factors that affected our ability to perform our activities. The question posed is: What areas must be improved?

Opportunities refer to external attractive factors that represent the reason why we desire to implement a professional development program and the key-question posed is: What opportunities are there already in the environment that we can benefit from?

Threats refer to external factors that can negatively impact the results of the program. They can either be a barrier or a constraint that can cause problems, damage or prejudice to the organization.

4. Results

The SWOT analysis revealed, first and foremost, a necessity for such a program for professional development, and there have been a number of varied opinions put forward regarding the strong points and opportunities.

The SWOT analysis was conducted on two groups - on the one hand the social workers who were the beneficiaries of the professional development program and on the other hand - the trainers who developed and implemented the program.

According to social workers, the *strengths*, the positive, internal aspects of the developed program, which can be controlled and used in planning future programs of this kind, were: the extension of already acquired knowledge, the desire and motivations the participants have showed towards the program, the development of aptitudes and professional skills, group interaction and self-awareness.

On the other hand, trainers identified the following strengths: the desire to develop the social department within the foundation, desire that the management of the organization supported fully, the implementation of a professional development program that was well structured and adapted to the needs of the participants, the desire for personal and professional

development for both the participants and the trainers, as well as the uniqueness of this program within Brasov county.

The *weaknesses*, the internal, negative aspects of the developed program, those that were controllable and can be improved when developing future sessions, described by the social workers, were: the limited time in which the program took place, the large timespan between the trainers and participants' programs, the inadequate space (within the foundation), a number of professional emergencies that limited the participation of social workers to the training sessions, a number of diverse personal limits as well as methodological work limits

According to the trainers, the weaknesses of the program were: the difficulty to match schedules (for the trainers and participants) which led to carrying out the program over a longer period of time than initially planned, the inadequate location (ideally, there should have been a neutral space, outside of the premises of the foundation), the lack of continuity of the program, along with the observation that the program could be improved.

The *opportunities*, meaning those external, positive, uncontrollable conditions which we can use to our advantage when it comes to creating and implementing these programs were, according to social workers, the following: team cohesion and the development of interpersonal relationships, the fact that the program can be a starting point for professional supervision, which could prevent burn-out, the possibility to develop and extend the program, the identification of new opportunities for personal and professional development.

Trainers identified the following opportunities of the program: the development of inter-organizational relationships, possibilities for extending and implementing similar programs in other departments or organizations, the use of this program as a model of good practice in career training, the identification of sources for financing the implementation of such a program, the possibility to develop the program.

The last item of the SWOT analysis, the *threats*, those external, negative, uncontrollable conditions whose effects we can predict/avoid when it comes to creating and implementing these professional programs were identified by the social workers as following: the limited time of the program, without there being a possibility to continue, for now, the lack of funds to continue the program, unfit legislation.

Trainers identified the same threats as social workers did, with the addition that, in their view, managers were reluctant to send their employees to such training programs.

The implemented development program was seen by social workers and trainers alike as an opportunity for personal and professional development, as well as a chance to improve aptitudes and professional skills. The weak suits of the program revealed the difficulty to match the schedules of everyone involved, which requires the program to be improved not just methodologically, but by creating a schedule that's more organized and put together from the beginning of the program, while also choosing a better location outside of the beneficiary organization.

Among the opportunities we gathered from the received answers, we should also note the development of interpersonal and inter-organizational relationships (between the Foundation Hospice "House of Hope" and the Transilvania University of Brasov), which can lead to both developing and extending the program in the future. The threats expressed by social workers and trainers alike refer mainly to the lack of financial resources required to sustain the continuity and development of the program.

Conclusions

According to the partial results obtained through SWOT analysis, the program reached its proposed objectives, and it also met the expectations of the participants and the management of the organization.

The SWOT model is a purely descriptive model, meaning it does not offer explicit strategic recommendations regarding the professional development program. However, it is a means by which information can be organized and we can approximate probabilities for potential events to take place - both good and bad - which we can use as a base to create a strategy to develop the organization, as well as come up with operational plans.

Which is why, the data obtained through SWOT analysis will be used alongside the data obtained through the other technique utilized in the evaluation of the program - the semi-structured group interview, in order to respect the principle of methodological triangulation and in order to scientifically determine the efficiency of the professional development program conducted at the Foundation Hospice “House of Hope”.

The evaluation of employee performance and career development are two concepts that are tightly knit together. Both the social worker and the trainer share the same objective - they both wish for the employee to become more efficient, either immediately or in the future. This is why we can conclude that continual training and supervision is crucial in social assistance.

The ideas presented within this paper can be compiled and integrated into a list of procedures and good practice examples. They can be used in the creation of an evaluation tool for a human resources development program in the social assistance field.

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