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## CHAPTER 12.

# Strategic competence and the transformative role of ICT in lifelong guidance

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### 12.1. Introduction

At European Union level, lifelong guidance is acknowledged as a shared policy responsibility across the fields of education, training, youth, employment, and social affairs. A number of European case studies and reviews strongly indicate that the demand for guidance far exceeds the supply of services and that citizens' needs cannot be met by relying exclusively on traditional forms (e.g. Barns et al., 2020; ELGPN, 2010; Zelloth, 2009). No service provider, professional group or organisation can alone respond to the increasing needs of more diverse client groups. A growing number of countries are linking lifelong guidance with lifelong learning and providing continuity between different sectors in policy development and service delivery. The Estonian EU Presidency 2017 Conclusions on lifelong guidance also note that widening access to coherent services in an effective way necessitates policy coherence, partnerships, LMI sharing, service professionalisation, and service integration.

Technological upheaval is profoundly affecting the provision of guidance and inspiring alliances among new and existing partners and services. Despite the increasing use of ICT-based career services in many countries, the success of these provisions varies significantly from country to country (e.g. Barns et al., 2020; Kettunen & Sampson, 2019; Kettunen, Vuorinen & Ruusuvirta, 2016). In developing national career information and resources, practitioners and policy-makers alike must identify any gaps in their current knowledge to develop a more advanced understanding of how ICT can improve guidance services. This understanding is fundamental to the development and successful implementation of existing and emerging technologies in guidance services. If ICT is viewed

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solely as an information delivery channel, or if the development of tools for diverse user groups remains fragmented, technology's full potential cannot be exploited in pursuing integrated service delivery or formulating lifelong guidance policies (Kettunen et al., 2016). Increased synergies among actors and stakeholders at national, regional, and local levels is needed to ensure a common vision, leadership support, and a strategic path for the successful implementation of existing and emerging technologies in guidance services (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019).

While the importance and utility of career guidance and counselling are generally acknowledged by societies around the world, retaining the quality of practice is challenging in service delivery environments where practitioners are under pressure to achieve more for less (Barnes et al., 2020). In decentralised administrations, or in contexts without legislation for career guidance, service providers have considerable autonomy in how they deliver and organise lifelong guidance (LLG) services for their users. This implies that career practitioners need to have opportunities to share their experiences and mentor others. National competence frameworks for practitioners provide a common model for promoting professionalism in a decentralised administrative structure (Barnes et al., 2020), and the European Union has funded a number of projects that have developed competence frameworks (e.g. Cedefop 2009), job profiles (e.g. European Commission, 2014) and standards (e.g. Schiersmann et al., 2016) for career practitioners. International professional associations (e.g. IAEVG, 2018; NCD, 2009) provide competence frameworks, which can be applied at national or regional levels. Most of the frameworks consist of occupational descriptions for different types of career practitioners, encapsulating practitioners' roles and main tasks in specific settings or with specific user groups. They also link theories, questions of knowledge, values, attitudes and skills to their overall meaning for practitioner performance (Niles, Vuorinen & Siwiec, 2019).

The main driver of the development of most international competence frameworks has been the question of what support individual citizens need. Wider tasks that are related, for example, to the coordination of guidance services are perceived as being beyond what should reasonably be expected from all career practitioners (e.g. Schiersmann et al., 2016). However, transformation of lifelong guidance towards collective and group-based activities is a process engaging many actors, various interests, and multiple layers (Nykänen, Saukkonen & Vuorinen, 2012). Career practitioners should be able to cope with more complex situations and operate adequately in potentially contradictory roles. In addition to competences involving working with clients – especially given the lack of binding legislation or national quality frameworks for guidance in most EU Member States (Barnes et al., 2020) – practitioners must

more strongly emphasise strategic competences that enable them to define their new roles and tasks in multi-professional networks, both within organisations and at the interfaces of service providers (Vuorinen & Kettunen, 2017).

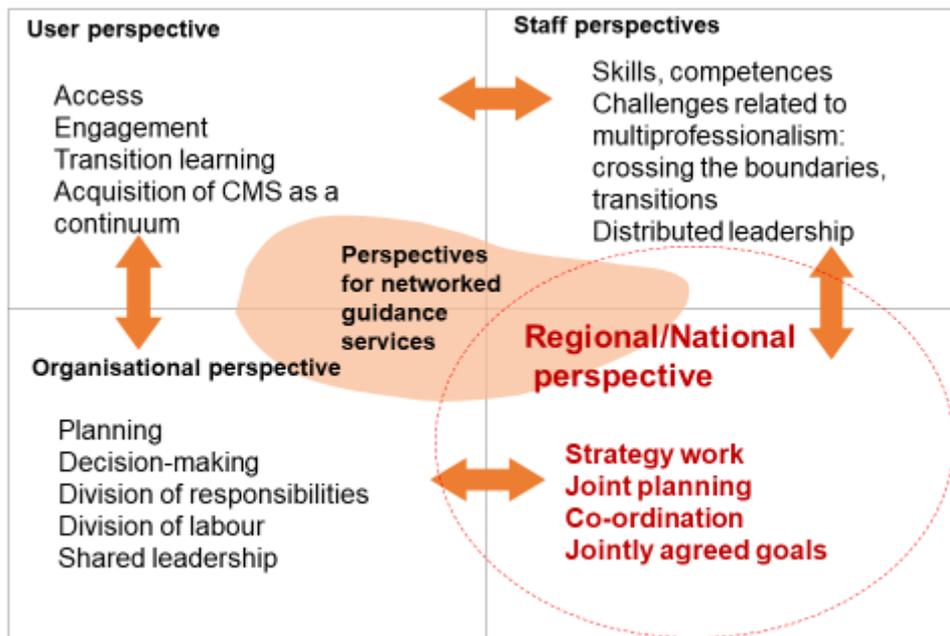
To sum up, inconsistency in legislation and growing autonomy imply that career practitioners need competences in creating an understanding of which national and local actors should be involved (and how) in the design and delivery of guidance services. Mintzberg (1995) defines this kind of strategic thinking as 'seeing': seeing ahead and behind, seeing above and below, seeing beside and beyond, and seeing it through.

Strategic thinking takes an expansive view of career guidance and counselling, with three pairs of opposing perspectives and one overarching one (Mintzberg, 1995). Seeing 'ahead' reflects the future-oriented perspective of all guidance processes. At the same time, we must be aware of the evolution of career guidance services, so seeing 'behind' provides an opposing perspective to maintain a strategic view. To understand the locus of career services between different sectors, it is necessary to see oneself 'from above' and to discern the underlying principles by looking 'from below'. To build cross-sectoral partnerships in the design and implementation of career services, practitioners need to find collaborators by 'seeing beside', and they must 'see beyond' the current provision to foster innovation. After reflecting on these different perspectives, it is possible to 'see it through' and understand the underpinnings and key features of the career guidance system and define the necessary preconditions for consistent, coherent service delivery.

## 12.2. Four perspectives on strategic competences

In strengthening career practitioners' strategic competences, for developing relationships and partnerships with key stakeholders to establish a sustainable mandate for career services in decentralised contexts, it is crucial to apply strategic thinking as 'seeing' and to pay greater attention to the four perspectives below, connected to multi-professional guidance service delivery (Figure 1). Widening perspectives beyond one's individual practice enables practitioners to position guidance services and themselves as service providers in an interface between different sectors and discipliners. This broader understanding of the systemic nature of career services contributes to the effective and efficient use of ICT in guidance and counselling (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019).

Figure 1. **Diverse perspectives on networked multi-professional guidance services**



Source: Nykänen Karjalainen, M., Vuorinen, R., & Pöylyö, 2007.

### User perspective

Career professionals perceive an individual's learning path as a continuum and a chain of interfaces between training and working life. In various transition phases, individuals use different career services from different organisations. From an individual perspective, career services are perceived as an activity that crosses organisational boundaries and may be patchy and fragmented. When experts plan career services, users are not necessarily asked what kind of services they need; but, when career services are understood as a user's entitlement, individuals become better aware of what services exist and what they can expect from them. This urges service providers to shift their view from the supplier perspective to the user perspective and their focus from helping to enabling. This requires service providers to 'see beyond' the supplier perspective and to create new measures to obtain a better understanding of the needs of diverse user groups and their readiness for career development. This changes the operational boundaries of organisations and challenges them to 'see beside' to produce knowledge together and learn regionally and organisationally (Nykänen et al., 2007, 2012).

### Staff perspective

In cross-sectoral networks, guidance services are provided at multi-professional interfaces with other practitioners or organisations, in a learning space, and have

to be able to provide a rationale for their existence, their knowledge and juridical position (Nykänen et al., 2012; Nykänen, 2011). A multi-professional network is a mechanism of coordination, organisation, and collaboration. It is important from the viewpoint of referral to services, availability and fit that staff members in different organisations know what services others provide. Together, the practitioners solve problems, create knowledge and innovations, and acquire resources. They participate both in the coordination of their network and in its management tasks (Nykänen, 2011). Ideally, this work allocation and coordination approach comes close to the concept of distributed leadership (Gronn, 2008).

### **Organisation perspective**

The organisational perspective refers to the planning, coordinating and implementation of guidance services within an organisation. Within an organisation responsible for career services, practitioners with different job profiles cooperate in multi-professional teams, such as in community centres, one-stop-shops, a distributed centre (no co-location location) or via online platforms. Multi-professional cooperation supports mutual trust and reduces isolation and unnecessary competition for clients and resources. Cooperation can be extended to cover planning the division of labour, eliminating overlapping duties, agreeing on the core activities of the services, and producing joint guidance materials, as well as improving the activities of guidance providers. The division of labour and shared responsibility together include how guidance services are implemented, planned, and coordinated within and between organisations and administrators at national, regional, and organisational levels (Nykänen, 2011).

### **Regional/national perspective**

The regional/national perspective refers to formal or informal inter-organisational networks of guidance providers from different government sectors across the fields of education, training, youth, employment, and social affairs policy. Cedefop (2020) provides evidence of national-level efforts to increase collaboration among professionals and involve new actors in guidance provision. According to Barnes et al. (2020), effective and multi-directional communication needs strengthening as it has a pivotal role in securing maximum impact of LLG services and facilitating leadership and cooperation. In practice, the capacity of networks to produce innovations has to do with 'seeing through' and with the creation of structures and relationships, leadership, expertise, and the envisioning of entire processes. Technology can bring together a range of

relevant partners to provide coordinated and seamless specialised service throughout an individual's life.

At regional and local levels, the structures for cooperation need to be established in accordance with local conditions, but local networks with multi-organisational structures often have contradictory aims and goals due to their operational cultures, mandates, and internal administrative statutory arrangements. Often, there are different perceptions of the key concepts, features and underlying principles of career guidance. In providing career services, organisations from different sectors may find themselves in competition for the same limited resources (ELGPN, 2010).

Municipalities and local public employment service (PES) offices are increasingly important in coordinating guidance stakeholders, illustrating the need for career practitioners to engage in multi-layered, multi-administrative regional strategic work. The practitioners should more often 'look beyond' and cross the boundaries between different sectors to collaborate in creating shared knowledge and solutions in complex problem-solving situations. This is crucial in, for example, outreach strategies, validation of skills, enterprise-based career learning activities and flexible training offers leading to qualifications. It is also important that when working with individuals, practitioners connect career issues into wider life contexts. From this perspective, 'seeing beyond' includes understanding and knowledge of how clients can finance learning, which programmes are available or should be promoted for financial and non-financial support for learning. Such jointly formed knowledge overcomes sectoral protectionism, promotes the efficiency of investments and increases the potential for solving problems that a single individual or professional group cannot tackle (Engeström, 2004; Kettunen, 2021; McGuire, 2006; Nykänen, 2011).

Further, an important area of this strategic competence is guidance personnel's exploratory reflection on their own activity and subsequent evaluation of the services (Nykänen, 2010). Practitioners should be able to apply the basic theories of career development and should also be able to interpret the nature and quality of their relationships with clients and the premises for career development. Wider reflection focuses on the content of career services and the education system, working life and wider community as a context for career services. Strategic thinking empowers practitioners to take responsibility for changing their work through pilots or development projects: in which settings and contexts it is relevant and feasible to use ICT and to promote synergies in the strategic planning of the services; which are the internal and external networks where guidance expertise could be utilised? Only changes in doing can promote changes in seeing. These two approaches are interwoven and embedded in each other, and they emerge simultaneously.

### 12.3. Conclusions

Existing international competence frameworks have references to how career practitioners need to intervene in social systems and community development. The references aim to design, implement and evaluate interventions to address the needs of user groups, not directly to strategic transformation of the guidance services (e.g. IAEVG, 2018; Schiersmann et al., 2016). Practitioners are encouraged to contact stakeholders, approach existing networks, and build new ones. They are expected to be competent in engaging in societal debate about the purposes of career guidance and counselling and to advocate on behalf of people seeking support in career-related issues (Schiersmann et al., 2016).

The IAEVG (2018) and Cedefop (2009) competence frameworks include attempts to promote strategic thinking in career services by encouraging collaboration between community partners. To demonstrate this specialised competence, practitioners are encouraged to work with the local community to analyse human and material resources and use them effectively according to a community needs assessment. The European reference competence profile for PES and European Employment Services (EURES) counsellors (European Commission, 2014) follows the Cedefop competence areas but includes strategic thinking in dealing with the use of ICT in the service provision.

Transforming career guidance services to improve access and address social equity in accordance with constant changes in society make it necessary to employ a stronger systemic approach in developing proactive lifelong guidance services in all sectors (ELGPN, 2015). Transdisciplinary collaboration entails a shift from traditional expert services and established networks to a dynamic combination of independent and communal ways of working (Kettunen and Felt, 2020). Key elements of practitioners' strategic competences are needed to develop, implement, and evaluate policies and action plans to address economic, social, educational and employment goals of the community (IAEVG, 2018).

To exploit the full potential of existing and emerging technologies, career practitioners must understand the broader goal of career services and collaborate with partners, system developers and policy-makers in the design and delivery of services and in the evaluation of their impact and effectiveness. This early involvement in multi-actor collaboration should take place in public administrations, between members of different public bodies, and amongst private partners. This requires understanding of how theoretical frameworks could inform a jointly determined vision of existing ICT-based career services and how these frameworks can be embedded in the design of and effective integration of such services (Kettunen & Sampson, 2019). The diverse

perspectives on networked multi-professional guidance services presented here offer one such example.

These new strategic competences should be part of initial practitioner training programmes of and continuous professional development in all settings, but they become even more crucial in countries that are increasing their market-based service providers in accordance with liberal regimes (Moreno da Fonseca, 2015). According to Barnes et al. (2020), strategic competence is particularly important in decentralised contexts where practitioners are very much on their own and lack organisational support.

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