

CAREERS OFFICE AT WROCLAW UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY AS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

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Abstract

Background. The Careers Office is a part of Wroclaw University of Technology (Poland). It is responsible for job activation of students and graduates. Challenges and changes coming from dynamic job market relations encourage team members of the Careers Office to take a new approach in management and self-development.

Research aims. This paper presents some innovative actions undertaken by the office such as: researches of student's expectations or organization change elements (i.e. involving students as volunteers). The aim of this article is to prove that Careers Office can be recognized as a learning organization. Second goal is assessment try of effectiveness rate of the Office in selected aspects of their activity backed by interviews and survey among students.

Methodology. The search for an appropriate framework of learning organization definition was based on scientific literature review. Exploration of actual action undertaken by the office was based on a survey among the students and partially standardized interview with employees of the office.

Key findings. The Careers Office can be recognized as a learning organization based on its multiple definitions elements. The majority of students assessed their Career Office as good in the survey, although their expectations towards organization and the university are very high.

Keywords: Public service, Learning organization, Volunteer students

INTRODUCTION

Universities worldwide have established their own employment supporting organizations, sometimes called academic career guidance services or simply careers offices. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development distinguished four patterns of these career bureaux. One of them is specialised careers services which offer a variety of career guidance and placement services (OECD, 2004). At the Wroclaw University of Technology (WUT), the Careers Office was formed according this model. This Office is responsible for job activation, careers counselling, and contacts with employers to bring business closer to the University.

Young people in Poland are very ambitious and want to study at tertiary education level, as shown by a constantly growing enrolment ratio from 9,8% in 1990 to 40,9% in 2009. Last published data from

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2011 shows, that the net enrolment ratio was 40,6% (MNiSW, 2013). On the other side, unemployment among graduates of Polish Universities is also growing since 1990 and in 2013 it was 5,6% (GUS, 2014). Observed dynamic changes in the domestic job market are challenge for the all of employment supporting organizations in the public sector – careers offices especially. In the Polish job market, tensions coming from demographic changes, like the ageing of Polish society and work emigration of young people, also have a significant impact.

The first part of this paper presents a brief history of Careers Office (CO) at the Wroclaw University of Technology. The next part is focused on the definition of Learning Organization (LO) given by many influential authors and researchers and comparing them with Careers Office selected activities. From this background one common definition of learning organization was formed. In this section it was also proved that the CO can be recognized as a learning organization under the conditions declared in chapter. That part of the article presents selected areas of service provided by the Careers Office of Wroclaw University of Technology. The fourth part of this paper is an assessment trial of the effectiveness of the Careers Office of WUT given by its students. The last chapter presents opportunities and threats of the Office, and some recommendations are made.

The results presented below are backed by interviews with members of the Careers Office and a survey among the students. The interviews aim was to check all activities where elements of LO appears. The survey's aim was to ask students as a group of clients about their knowledge of the CO and to allow them asses the work of the office. Questions about the effectiveness, efficiency, utility or serviceabilitys always come up when an assessment is made of any organization. In these specific conditions, the question was also who should assess the office? In authors' opinion only students and graduates which participated in the office's programs and events can give a valid and reliable assessment of this organization. A second important question is it possible to develop into a learning organization? It seems to be possible within the bureaucratic environment of public administration (Pawluczuk, 2008), but it is very hard to obtain the right effect. This paper analyzes the influence of all changes since 2013 in Career Office service at the university and gives some answers to question: how has the office developed into learning organization?

BACKGROUND

The history of Career Office (CO) at Wroclaw University of Technology (WUT) began in 1997 when Wroclaw University of Technology, togeth-

er with University of Wroclaw and Province Labour Office of Lower Silesia, formed a Bureau of Employment Promotion for Students and Graduates of both universities. The idea of forming a bureau was to improve communication between universities and employers looking for the best candidates in local job market. The first office in Lower Silesia was remarkably successful, and appeared to be the right answer for local employer demands of that time. Career offices began first researches about further career life of graduates and surveys among students who had problems finding a relevant job, so vocational advice was crucial. Career offices also conducted first researches among local employers to obtain knowledge about their expectations of students and graduates from the universities. The other researches showed also that there are huge differences between students from different universities in such areas as demands, expectations, competencies, skills and entrepreneurship (Madej, 2005). On the other side at WUT it was observed that a constantly growing number of students were interested in their future career.

Finally in 2009 the University decided to set up its own career office as part of the university located closer to students on campus, as a EU founded project. Today the office is completely funded by WUT and belongs to its Student Service Department. The main goals of the CO remain unchanged and are: creating a positive environment for cooperation of the university with business, helping to find suitable employers for candidates (students and graduates) and developing the skills of students for better performance on the job market. In Polish conditions, the office is a large office and currently 6 fulltime employees work there. They are supported (only during events) by 9 volunteer students since 2013. The idea to use some volunteers seems to be a milestone in development into a learning organization. Because the office as part of the university serves 34100 students (WUT, 2015), the number of volunteers is also growing in order to perform better. Although many of them graduated, new students joined so that in first quarter of 2015 there were 25 volunteer students (3 of whom were there from the start in 2013).

Researches and studies in the area of graduates careers are a key factor for improvement of teaching methods at the University and students preparation for the employment process. The researches undertaken by CO also shows the attitude of the team members – which is a proactive approach. The CO is special kind of public organization, because of its mission and goals and in order to be more beneficial for its clients, the students and graduates of WUT, innovative methods like lectures given by company members and workshops which attract an increasing number of students over time have been held.

The Career Office uses a model of individual learning (Table 1) that happens through activities such as training, increasing skills, work experience and formal education (dedicated to employers of the office). The Career Office actively promotes, facilitates and rewards collective learning (which is in accordance with a Senge idea). The office actively creates, captures, transfers and mobilizes knowledge to enable it to adapt to a changing environment (rapidly growing job market of Lower Silesia). The analysis of the work culture in this organization in Table 1 shows the key aspects of organizational learning as the interaction which takes place among individuals.

The Polish office is based on a model, which is more focused on vocational advice and transition into job market (Madej, 2005). The Polish office is also completely funded from the university budget and serves its clients free of charge (Madej, 2005). The Career Office does not offer close care for their students (internship or job finding and application help step by step) but it offers something else – their independence. Polish students have to do a minimum of 2 weeks up to 1 month student internship during their studies. It is up to the students how many internships they want to attend. Creativity and entrepreneurship are skills forced by the specific job market in Poland (Sulich, 2015). The Career Office also uses its own website and social media like Facebook, LinkedIn or Google+ to post new job offers and communicate with students and graduates who may be interested in organized events, job fairs or workshops held on the university campus. Since 1997, after almost 18 years of its work the Career Office of Wroclaw University of Technology has matured and has changed so much that today it can be an example of a learning organization.

DEFINITIONS OF LEARNING ORGANIZATION (LO)

In the modern world knowledge is the key factor for future development and innovations (Olejniczak et al., 2012), which can give competitive advantage. This is the new value which makes possible competency between individuals, companies and even countries (Olejniczak et al., 2012). These main trends in researches, stemming from the idea that knowledge and learning processes are the most important factors of organizations development, is the Learning Organization (LO) concept (Pawluczuk, 2008). Some elements of ideas about LO are presented below to define what a learning organization is. A learning organization theory was introduced in work and research of P. Senge and many other scientists who noticed the importance of his idea (Cors, 2003) and developed it. A LO is concentrated not only in good performance but also in development of its members, proceedings and all

organization (Senge, 1990). Learning Organization values come from the members of the organization and that derives competitive advantage from continual learning (Senge, 1990). Individual Learning Organization's members can lead to development of its common knowledge, they can be more involved in teams (Senge et al., 1994). An intrinsic attitude and desire to learn approach of individuals seems to be crucial—without will to self-develop among all team members nothing will be changed (Senge et al., 1994). The change of an organization into an LO is a result of the pressure facing modern organizations from the business environment (Pedler et al., 1997). The bureau at the WUT is an example that no competition or pressure from surrounding is needed to start the change. The Careers Office does not compete with other similar offices but they exchange information and knowledge. The CO cooperates and shares experience in the network with other commercial and public employment supporting organizations. M. Wheatly offers some interesting ideas describing learning organizations as constantly rising in organizational harmony driven mostly by information. Members of learning organizations create a network where information is exchanged (Wheatly, 1999). Next to this network exist webs of relations which are crucial in LO (Wheatly, 1999). The Career Office which belongs to many local and national associations, is where knowledge and experiences are exchanged.

A very influential researcher is C. Argyris, who is known for disseminating ideas about how learning can improve organizational success (Abernathy, 1999). Argyris formed his concept of a learning organization as distinguishing between learning that challenges the status quo, called double-loop learning, and learning that is routine, called single-loop learning (Abernathy, 1999; Argyris, 1994). Double-loop learning depends on stewardship, or the internal commitment by employees to seek truth and transparency (Argyris, 1994). This idea is common with Senge's definition especially because of the importance of individual's engagement as an internal attitude (Senge 1990). According to this idea the crucial element is to challenge employees, with as much intrinsic motivation, to think constantly and creatively about the needs of the organization (Argyris, 1994). The element of both system thinking and the double-loop learning process are the evaluation processes which take place in the CO after every activity undertaken (Argyris, 1994).

The question always is: who should evaluate internal activities?, contrary to events organized for clients of the office (students, graduates or employers). Similar to this approach is another definition of learning organization that was proposed by D. Schön, who formed his concept of organizational learning as reflection in action based on con-

structuring a learning dialectic in organizations and the practice of learning how to learn (Lichtenstein, 2000). Most literature on organizational learning describes the process of learning as a series of separable elements that may generate learning over time (Lichtenstein, 2000). D. Schön's approach is that action and reflection should occur at the same time so that learning is used in concrete situations (Shon, 1983). The learning organization needs to learn more about itself from itself, and meetings or a shared workplace can only help with that (Lencioni, 2002). The similarity in these theories is the importance of sharing knowledge and communicating it well, to highlight the effects we are learning from (Senge, 1990). The bureau analyzed currently works in open space conditions which helps to maintain the information exchange and self-coaching process.

All influential ideas of the learning organization mentioned shows the holistic nature of the learning process and means that it operates at all levels of human society. All theories are similar in member's dedication and passion, who want to perform better and they are able to accept the upcoming changes. In this article Learning Organization is defined as an innovative model of a continuously changing organization and system transformation without any change interventions by leaders (Senge, 1994). Development into a learning organization can be successful in public service or administration because of lack of competition between organizations, but the pressure of the business environment is different. The LO concept formed here is based on the previously explained ideas (P. Senge's mainly). The Learning Organization is constantly learning and its members are aware of all changes and development goals. Members of LO are self-motivated and are willing to exchange their knowledge with each other.

CAREERS OFFICE ACTIVITIES

Table 1 presents elements of influential ideas about the learning organization and compares them with the actions which happen in the office all the time. The effect of this learning organization is a constant change and improvement into LO. It is backed by the interviews and observations. Table 1 also reveals the huge activity of this case study office, which shows how effective theory can be introduced into practice.

A huge project which was begun in 2013 – Volunteers of Career Office (Careers Brigade) is a milestone in the change of the office into a Learning Organization. Members of the Brigade are students from almost all departments of the University, which support the CO's employees mainly in areas of promotion and organization of the events and other projects. Only a few of them had worked in during the previ-

ous year, but the knowledge and culture of work is spread smoothly. This team of young volunteers also organizes the survey among the students of Wroclaw University of Technology every year. The aim of survey is to select the best employer in the student's opinion and find their expectations in first job. From this project all members of CO learn how to organize their work to be closer to students. Experiences gained every year during the work with volunteers are precious for future relations with fresh students. Former members of the Careers Brigade are active ambassadors of the CO among their employers.

Table 1. Elements of Many Theories about Learning Organization Compared with Activities Performed by Careers Office at Wroclaw University of Technology

Element of learning organization definition	Application or activity of the Careers Office
Shared vision (Senge, 1990) and clear goals (Pawluczuk, 2008).	Work in open space office area in office.
Development of common knowledge (Senge 1990).	Weekly meetings.
Individual and collective learning (Senge, 1990).	Change management awareness.
Personal mastery (Senge, 1990).	Trainings and experience exchange between employees and other careers bureaus (network).
Communication and information exchange (Senge, 1990; Lencioni, 2002).	Attendance in local and domestic conferences for staff of the similar offices.
System thinking (Senge, 1990).	Some documents are used from shared drives.
Learning by procedures (Argyris & Schon 1978).	Planning and realization events and projects.
Reflection in action (Argyris, 1994; Schon 1983).	Half yearly reports.
Double loop learning mechanism (Argyris & Schon 1978; Olejniczak et. al 2012).	Evaluation procedures after events.
Learning in the cycle consist of experience, observation, reflection, conceptualization and testing new knowledge (Kolb, 1984).	Feedback and researches about clients' needs (students', graduates' and employers').
Shared responsibility and authority (Senge, 1990).	Deming cycle as element of assessment and development in the office.
Not shared and not distributed leadership (Coldwell, 2011).	Some projects run simultaneously by head of the office and delegated employees.
Reintegration of organizations' members (Wheatly, 1999)	Half yearly and yearly performance assessment.
Different types of knowledge (social knowledge and know-how) which is learn, teach and exchange (Olejniczak et. al 2012).	Volunteer students realize their own projects also support the office.
Knowledge shift approach (Olejniczak et. al 2012)	Publications for students and graduates.
	Workshops, presentations and lectures given by employers.
	Coaching and vocational advice as a long term relationship.

Source: own elaboration.

Relationships built during the work in this project bring benefits to all WUT community. The practice, internships and job offers become wider every year. The idea to have volunteers in the office was simple and brilliant – because thanks to that the students can gain their new experience in non-profit activity.

Each year Career Office cooperates with the Manus Foundation at Wroclaw University of Technology during the Academic Job Fairs co-organized with the foundation. During this 2-day event all members of Career Office are involved. While full time staff are engaged in preparation of the offer brochure (Employers Catalogue), volunteers work on their surveys promotion and recruiting new members of Careers Brigade (the team changes every year). The exchange of knowledge and experiences takes place during the weekly meetings. Close cooperation of both groups create a new approach to public service based on trust, shared vision, engagement and leadership which are cardinal elements of development into a Learning Organization (Senge, 1990).

The change from being just a career office into a learning organization is visible in the approach of management. Development of individual skills and the learning process is strongly supported. Also the young members are learning during the workshops specially dedicated to them by the Career Office. A significant fact is that the Career office created the Lower Silesian Web of Career Offices (and is a member of the Polish Career Offices Web) to exchange knowledge and develop itself as learning organization. There is a system of learning in the CO which allows collective learning of organization in maintenance and better service for its clients.

RESULTS

In first quarter of 2014 the Volunteers of Career Office in cooperation with CO at WUT conducted the survey among students. The aim of the research was to obtain knowledge about students' expectations of the CO. Students were asked also to make an assessment of the office. The third goal was to learn about fields for improvements, which have to be made. In the survey 286 students from all 12 faculties of the University took part. A majority of them studied at the Faculty of Electronics (33%) and Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (22%). These divisions have the biggest number of students, so the number of participants is representative of the whole student population. The survey shows a spectrum of students by year and level of studies (64% BSc, 32% MSc, 4% PhD students). It is a representative group and shows the relation between numbers of students at degree levels in WUT. A significant

number (85%) of participants in the survey did not know that the service provided by the CO is free of charge and even graduates can participate in it indefinitely. The reason for their unawareness may be that during their first years at the University they are focused on their studies mainly until they start master studies (Bologna scheme). Students mostly become more interested in their career development and future when it is time to graduate.

It seems that the location of CO was unknown (room 1. 08, building C-13 at the main University Campus in very characteristic building) to many of the students surveyed (38%) in 2014. Some students were uncertain where exactly the office is located (27%), but some were pretty sure and stated the correct location (35%). The survey shows although that even though students are unsure of where the Office is, they know what kind of service it provides (83%). Although a number of students answered that they cannot precisely describe the field of service (27%). The survey aim was to give feedback for the office activities. In the survey students were asked whether they need vocational advice or any related help. A significant group of students is not interested in any help or service from the CO (31% of all answers) because they just want to finish their studies and want develop their career on their own. The number of students with no knowledge about the office (38%) is similar to the number of students not interested in vocational advice. The majority of students (69% of all answers) expect more help and engagement from the members of the CO.

On the other hand, participants of the survey asked about the independence of career decisions stated that it is not important (79%) and they expect wider service. Students expect especially strong support in finding them a suitable job (65%) or vocational advice (71%) and free courses (92%). Participants of the research expressed they wish to have an employment guarantee after their studies, given them by the office (as public administration) which can be only a wish under current law conditions.

Students mostly take part in the Academic Job Fair Days and they find them very important and helpful (69%). Through this event they assess the service of CO as a very good initiative undertaken with Manus Foundation. There remain a large group of students, which have never attended Academic Job Fair Days (26%) or never heard about them (5%).

Participants of the survey were also asked to mark the Career Office (Figure 1) and in their opinion total mark for all activities and performance is positive and more than sufficient which 27% of participants gave this note to the office.

Students of the University of Technology based their assessment about the service of the CO on their own experience (21%) and on website content (77%) as backed by the survey. The other sources of knowledge about office seem to be less relevant. Unfortunately students do not recognize all opportunities created especially for them. Promotion of the service should be more visible on the website of the Career Office, which is assessed as good but still needs to be improved. As a learning organization, the CO made a good decision to involve students in its structure (volunteers) to be closer to students and graduates. Further surveys may show volunteers as ambassadors of the office future impact on the assessment given by students to the office and its image.

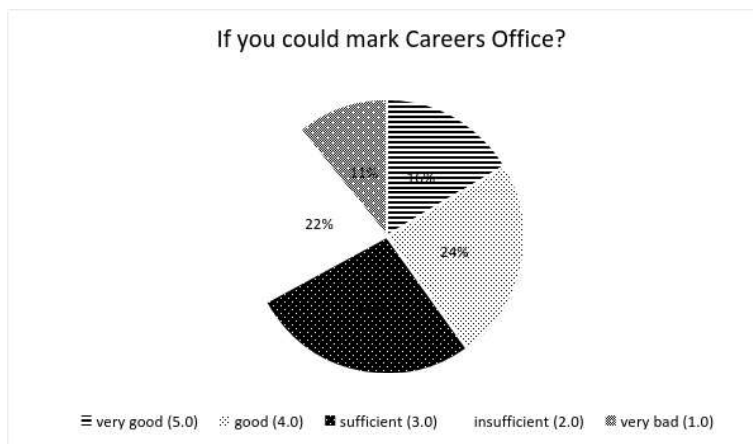


Figure 1. Notes Given by Students to Career Office in Polish Mark System

Source: Own elaboration.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

According to Senge LO exhibits five main characteristics (disciplines): systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning (Senge, 1990). The Career Office is not a perfect example of the learning organization, when compared only with Senge's idea, but this case study shows that organizations do organically develop into a learning organization (Table 1). On the other hand compared to other concepts which can be recognized as a good example of LO. There are factors prompting its constant change but the lack of competition from the business environment works adversely to the Office. There also

is a problem with the assessment of the office work from its client's side. The efficiency described in interviews by employees of the office or engaged students (which participated in workshops) is different from assessment given by students especially which never attended any activity offered by the bureau. In the survey used in this article most of students were not familiar with any CO activity nor its location. The wrong stereotype is very strong and widespread. To create competitive advantage, the Career Office needs to learn faster and work more effectively and create and develop a customer responsive culture to show the effects of their work – especially in social media and official website. There are high expectations among students of the Career Office which can be only partially fulfilled. All services provided by the Polish organization are free of charge, it is strongly recommended to involve business into co-funding all the activities for students which can be hired after the all the goals of training are accomplished.

According mentioned Argyris' idea of a learning organization, the Career Office should develop slowly but constantly to avoid losing its capacity to learn (Argyris, 1994). There is a plan to relocate the Career Office during the academic year 2015/2016 into a new building, still close to the campus of Wroclaw University of Technology. Relocation of the office can be a possibility to reduce the number of members of the office and this means that those who remain need to work more effectively (Senge, 1990) or train new members. Strongly recommended for the Career Office is to sustain the path as a learning organization and to present its work in social media and webpages. Future relocation can promote employment of new members in the Career Office. It is positive because the demands of both students and the local job market are constantly growing. Experiences from other career services can help expand all areas of public service not previously covered. Further closer cooperation is strongly recommended with many other Offices (as done in the Lower Silesian Career Offices Web) in Poland and abroad.

The practice of a daily meeting of the whole team should be practiced also in the future and this is a very good example of relationship management in the Career Office. The meeting allows all employees to share their ideas, and set new goals for future actions and projects. Also better understanding of demands from companies, entrepreneurs, graduates and students is needed. Surveys among students and single appointments with those looking for employers are not a sufficient source of knowledge about business which seems to become more complicated. A better solution seems to be organizing more workshops for students and networking events. The Career Office is very good platform to develop contacts between scientific circles (engaged students) and interested companies. It is very good element of system thinking

that the CO works in open space conditions and holds some documents on a shared drive.

The case study of careers office presented, shows the importance of EU funds and projects which seems to be igniters for development of the office into a learning organization. Changes coming from the influence of EU projects could have positive impact to management which want to learn and develop a more effective organization in bureaucracy environment conditions. The bureau is developing as the learning organization in the public sector for better service for its clients, students especially.

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BIURO KARIER POLITECHNIKI WROCŁAWSKIEJ JAKO ORGANIZACJA UCZĄCA SIĘ

Abstrakt

Tło badań. Biuro Kariera jest częścią Politechniki Wrocławskiej (Polska). Jest ono odpowiedzialne za aktywizację zawodową studentów i absolwentów. Wyzwania i dynamiczne zmiany na rynku pracy zachęcają członków zespołu Biura Karier do nowego podejścia w zarządzaniu oraz rozwoju osobistym.

Cel badań. W artykule przedstawiono kilka innowacyjnych działań podejmowanych przez Biuro Karier: badania oczekiwań studentów, zmian organizacyjnych (np. zachęcanie studentów do bycia wolontariuszem). Celem niniejszego artykułu jest wykazanie, że Biuro Karier może być uznane za organizację uczącą się. Drugim celem jest próba oceny efektywności Biura Karier w wybranych aspektach ich działalności.

Metodyka. W artykule dokonano przeglądu literatury przedmiotu. Ocena rzeczywistych działań podejmowanych przez Biuro Karier została dokonana na podstawie wyników, uzyskanych z częściowo ustandaryzowanych wywiadów, przeprowadzonych wśród studentów i pracowników biura.

Kluczowe wnioski. W oparciu o definicje zawarte w literaturze przedmiotu, Biuro Karier można uznać za organizację uczącą się. Większość studentów oceniła pracę Biura Karier za dobrą, chociaż ich oczekiwania są bardzo wysokie.

Słowa kluczowe: usługi publiczne, organizacja ucząca się, wolontariat studencki