TEAL – Summary of 2ⁿᵈ Knowledge Café

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Hosted by:

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OLDER LEARNERS DURING TRANSITIONS: IDENTIFYING AND TACKLING BARRIERS AND POSITIVE INTERVENTIONS FOR ENGAGING OLDER LEARNERS - SPANISH PERSPECTIVE

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2nd KNOWLEDGE CAFÉ: Identifying and tackling barriers – facilitated by Helen Pearson

The main topic focused on during the second Learning Café was 'Identifying and Tackling Barriers'. The mind maps at the end might have been chaotic but the ideas were insightful, barriers were identified, discussed and categorised into social, personal, and institutional barriers. With the notion of governments wanting to raise the retirement age, the matters outlined below are obstacles which older individuals find in their way towards new employment or starting up in business.

When finding new employment, personal obstacles can be conscious yet some are surprisingly unwitting. This can all depend on the situation of the individual, which affects their mental attitude immensely. Previous negative experiences such as losing a former job or a failed personal business can disturb the mind-set and affect motivation. Similarly, the environment surrounding the individual can lead to insecurity from financial issues to personal issues, such as health or caring for a loved one. Yet with crisis comes opportunity! Once a mental hurdle has been identified, it can be overcome.

A certain positive psychology needs to be put in place. The individual must understand and analyse what their personal goals and objectives are in order to fully tackle the barriers. To reflect on their own nature, on their needs, on personal issues and learn how to accept change. Acknowledging and verbalising their concerns is the first step to acceptance and simplifies the process. It might be inevitable to realise that changes in certain values might be needed in order to adapt. Upon all this reanalysis, a certain outcome can be expected: motivation or in some cases a lack of. A mental attitude of self-suppression is common amongst older individuals, where they either believe they are too old to start a new chapter or know that they need to invest their time and energy, and thus dispirit themselves from going further or taking chances. Moreover, as mentioned above, redundancy can cause a lack of confidence and thus discouragement in following through. Furthermore, support from the state or the wait for retirement being slight are observable excuses for individuals to feel like there is no need to continue. On the other hand, all these situations can lead to motivation where individuals do not want to repeat past mistakes and to surpass their own expectations. It can be as simple as acknowledging that they can be successful by following previous positive examples.

Institutional barriers are a more difficult matter. They cannot easily be altered by the individual. Companies which look for formal qualifications instead of experience, prove that there is a lack of recognition of informal learning. As society is changing at a faster pace than ever before, the labour context alters with it. New technologies are popping up every week and skills need to be adapted every time. When one has been in the same professional position for a long time, he or she might have not gained any extra skills other than the ones already held. Therefore there is a need to adapt. All of these circumstances give birth to a certain form of competition between the older and the younger workers.

The older might have the experience and reliability, whilst the younger have the capacity of freshness and the ability to innovate. On top of that, there is a stereotype where older individuals are immediately seen as experienced and willing to share their knowledge for free; that the older should be volunteering rather than getting paid. It does not therefore come as a surprise when older individuals feel discouraged. Though not only the older, but the younger experience struggles as well when finding employment. There are several stereotypes perceived by others towards older individuals. In individualistic cultures for example, some grow up with the idea that older individuals are not needed. This is difference of course in the more collectivistic cultures, where people are more family orientated. The lack of value assigned to them brings a lack of self-confidence. All these circumstances again can affect motivations and mental attitude.

Another institutional barrier, which affects everyone else as well, is the difficult financial situations a lot of businesses are finding themselves in at the moment. Cost reductions are on the table for some companies and thus hiring will not be a priority and usually, and unfortunately, older people are the first to be made redundant. They are under-valued, and these types of decisions are led by short-term thinking businesses, which create an insecure environment for older individuals.

Moreover, if older individuals do not want to go through the recruitment process again or want to start again, there is the idea of starting up in business. Research shows that more and more individuals over 50 are starting their own businesses yet this particular move is still daunting amongst older individuals. Again, the older and the younger fear this particular move as the fear of failing is upon many. This constant fear can be a real psychological barrier to taking risks. Research also shows that older people are more risk-averse concerning monetary decisions and thus more cautious and less prone to taking these risks. If the idea of setting up a business was a last desperate option as others have failed, the pressure is greater and demotivation can be expected. As mentioned before, the constant cloud of the economic crisis is relentlessly hanging over our heads. The social environment, as previously mentioned, plays a big role in decision making and mental attitudes. This also includes the personal environment. Situational constraints such as family commitments, mortgages, children at universities or even grand-children, can either give a boost in wanting to succeed, or opposingly, not want to gamble what one has already achieved.

Unfortunately, gender differences are experienced at any age even after nearly 60 years of outlawed sexual discrimination as enshrined in the Treaty of Rome. Research has shown that the reason why there is a lack of women in top positions is because of the deficiency of networks that women possess. The information concerning opportunities is therefore less likely to reach women than their counterparts and the support of other entrepreneurs who can mentor new start-ups.

This creates a social stereotype in the business world of women having less credibility, which can make it very difficult for women to enter this world.

An individual's mind set is very important in the process of starting up in business. Firstly, an idea must be at the start of the decision: An idea strong enough to compete with all the other ideas out there and be even better. Secondly, again, the understanding of the goals and objectives of the individual and the idea must be thoroughly revised. This usually helps when older individuals have a history of entrepreneurship, when he or she has been brought up in this type of culture. Once an entrepreneur, always an entrepreneur; they say. But this should not discourage anyone as it can be gained with, and I am repeating myself once again, a strong mind set and motivation! Mental attitude must be prepared; one must take a crisis and turn it into an opportunity and when there is no choice, find a solution. This all comes down to positive psychology where there must be no fear in accepting change and adaptability.

As George Bernard Shaw once said: "We don't stop playing because we get old; we get old because we stop playing". If these barriers are acknowledged, one can prove Mr Shaw right but start playing and experience not only a positive change in life, but also a boost in psychological health. Older individuals should not allow barriers to block their mental ability so as to not enter a downward spiral of discouragement. Transitions are opportunities and only involve hurdles not barriers: he or she who does not fight has already lost.

LINK TO MULTIMEDIA MATERIALS FROM THE WORKSHOP:
http://www.teal-project.eu/teal/?page_id=9 and
https://www.dropbox.com/sh/pv8mjf2sglvukb4/bXkO6qrFek