



OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS – KEY CONCEPT FOR LABOUR MARKET

Ileana NICULA

Faculty of Finance, Banking and Accounting Bucharest, Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University, E-mail: ileana_n2002@yahoo.com

Abstract *The globalization, the scientific and technique revolution, the important modifications in organizational culture and business ethics determine the development of a labour market more and more demanding. The occupational standards represent one of the answers to these challenges, pointing out both economical and social aspects. The working paper analyses the occupational standards functions, the conceptual framework, as well as the Romania alignment to the UE recommendations in this matter. The author has experience in occupational analysis, occupational and qualification standards, due to her participation in two projects developed in this area.*

Key words:

Competence (core, general, specific); occupational analysis and standards; major function; DACUM and ETED; skills

JEL Codes:

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1. Introduction

In the last 30 years the labour market has become more dynamic, more fluid and the employability has decreased concomitantly with the increase in unemployment.

On one hand, the globalization has boosted the two phenomena; on the other hand, it dropped them, in different places. The illiteracy at work (functional illiteracy) has become increasingly visible. Vocational education, training providers, universities failed to offer employees prepared to cope with this dynamic market. The certificates and university diplomas began to be without practical value. The period in which the occupations/professions were forever gained (after more or fewer years of schooling) and the regular updating of knowledge was sufficient has just ended.

A new type of business has developed, namely the training providers. In the banking industry new departments were established (training) and the senior bankers became the trainers, transferring the knowledge, skills and attitudes (the experience) to their junior colleagues. New skills and attitudes became visible (customer focus, cooperative and collaborative skills, self-starter, effective communication, problem solver, a continuous learning attitude, leadership and so on) and the specialists in these areas developed new concepts, new solutions (new know-how) and offered their training services. The team building has become 'a must have' in the banking industry and in the other top industries.

Moreover, business practice highlighted the need for specialized knowledge, based on corroboration

between knowledge from different fields, rounded by appropriate behaviour. The business requirements began to change rapidly and the employees could not keep the pace.

Unfortunately The School (in broad sense) lost the momentum, was stuck in the old paradigm (as much theoretical information without behavioural training and without interdisciplinary). The graduates were stuffed by information, but unable to cope with the job demands.

The gained experience during professional activities has proven to be very important in people's employability, as certificates and diplomas were trivialized and have become increasingly irrelevant.

On the competitive labour markets these developments were identified and analysed, looking for appropriate solutions.

The answer to these challenges may be concentrated in a single word, namely *competence*. The employees and applicants must prove their competence in practicing jobs, in accordance with certain standards.

In the Great Britain in the '80 these developments led to the establishment of entities that coordinate the elaboration of specific documents called *Occupational Standards* (OSs), whose core is the concept of *competence*.

The approach proved to be revolutionary, as the education bodies, the learning and teaching procedures, the context (formal, informal, non-formal) and the process duration prove to be neutral. The approach emphasizes the output (outcome), more precisely on competence.

2. Occupational standards and Romania

The functions of OSs are:

- to balance the employment requirements with the training and educational processes, in order to synchronize with the labour market movements;
- to enhance the employability;
- to be transparent for employers and applicants, in order to allow fairness and equal opportunities;
- to be transparent in order to allow the workforce mobility;
- to allow the recognition of the working experience, beyond certificates and diplomas “a validation of non-formal and informal learning” [3];
- to be relevant at macro and micro levels, taking into account that, socially and economically, there are many stakeholders on the labour market, which should cooperate in order to ensure sustainable development;
- to allow the development and improvement of the training processes on competitive market and a correct competition between training bidders;
- the OSs structure allows simple updating to keep pace with the labour market evolution.
- to allow correct, transparent and unbiased assessments, based on realistic benchmarks, neutral to the training providers and other stakeholders (independent awarding bodies are important entities within this framework);

Apart from employees and employers, the stakeholders are social partners as trade unions, professional associations, employment’s services, training and educational providers, and independent awarding bodies.

European Parliament Council issued in 2008 a recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualification Framework (EQF) for lifelong learning, published in the Official Journal of the European Union (April 2008).

The document defines:

- the concepts and principles underlying competence-based education; and
- the necessity of interconnecting the labour market to the formal educational systems „to develop a framework for the recognition of qualifications for both education and training, building on the achievements of the Bologna process and promoting similar action in the area of vocational training” [3].

Almost all the EU countries were successfully adopted and implemented the recommendation. The stated goal was to „contribute to modernising education and

training systems, the interrelationship of education, training and employment and building bridges between formal, non-formal and informal learning, leading also to the validation of learning outcomes acquired through experience” [3].

The occupational, educational and qualification standards have been the response to the knowledge-based society challenges.

The recommendation is non-binding and each and every country should define its national occupational and educational standards, as well as its national qualifications, according to the national legislation and practice.

Our country adopted the OSs in the mid of '90 (more than ten years earlier than EQF), being helped by a World Bank programme and set up an important body The Council for Occupational Standards and Awarding (COSA, 1994), transformed then in the National Council for Professional Training of the Adults (CNFPA, 2003). Now this body is the National Agency of Qualifications (ANC), an important body in the evolution of occupational standards. The main goal of the World Bank programme was to train individuals to write OSs, to transfer the know-how.

The training was an important part as this new framework which was developing concepts, definitions, contexts, approaches very different from what jobs/occupations or professions were classically seen by all the actors (businesses, schools, working people, professional associations, trade unions etc.).

COSA cooperation with interested parties led to the establishment of the necessary legislation and structures with key roles such as industry committees. The legal framework develops and benefits by the accumulated expertise at national and European level. Moreover, the European Parliament Council recommended educational systems to take OSs as model and to develop *educational standards* (ESs).

Romania was aligned with this recommendation and developed the National Framework in Higher Education (CNCIS). The national body responsible in the university domain is National Agency for the Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the economical and social sector (ACPART).

3. Occupational analysis

The first step for the development of occupational standards is occupational analysis. According to the Guide for the occupational analysis issued by the former CNFPA (ANC-National Authority for Qualifications) „occupational analysis should identify all the responsibilities within a specific occupational area, using different methods to collect data, in order to define the requested competences for fulfilling them.” [1]

Practically, the job description document and the watch of an individual during performing his/her job are the main methods to identify the necessary information. In the literature there are several approaches for occupational analysis:

- functional analysis – „the key purpose of an occupation are identified and subdivided into function and sub-function until the outcomes of each function are identified” [2]. It focuses not on the steps or stages of the work process; it focuses on the main outputs/outcomes and on the responsibilities. The activities are separated from the methods used for fulfilling them.

- DACUM (from **D**evelopment of a **C**urricul**U**M) is a systematic analysis of a job in order to identify „the major tasks and duties, as well as knowledge, skill, tools and equipment” [2] requested to fulfil the main responsibilities. Generally speaking this method is less deployed for occupational analysis, being used for training program development, but some procedures are valuable for getting a higher accuracy of the information.

- ETED (**E**mloi-**T**ype **E**tudié dans sa **D**ynamique or typical job studied in its dynamic) – „based on the understanding of the competences as resources on which an individual can draw to act in a given situation and organisational context” [2]. Thus the draft of the job is contextualized, based on some elements such as economic and technological trends, which surround the core activities.

- Mixed methods – which practically draw a draft of the occupation profile in which the critical elements are „executive, preparatory, supporting and organising tasks, as well as competence requirements and the context in which the occupation is performed.” [2]. Thus the method clearly separates from this stage the types of competence/outputs (for instance a painter paint the walls – the core of his/her job – but can prepare the walls, the paints, chooses the appropriate paint or dye and so on).

The most used collecting techniques are: site surveys and direct observation, job description documents, individual interviews, focused/moderated interviews, questionnaires, conferences etc.

According to the above cited document each approach influences and is influenced by the collecting data technique. In the functional analysis the managers, practitioners are the main sources of information, where as in the DATCUM case the experts and the workers backed up by an accurate survey are the data collecting methods. The interviews with managers and practitioners are the specific data collection methods in ETED. The resulted draft using mixed methods is assessed by a guided/moderated group, in which the social partners and training providers and industry

experts are involved together with managers, job holders and others.

Each technique has its own strengths, weaknesses and limitations and the analyst should choose those methods that increase the strengths and diminish the weaknesses and limitations.

The (a) data collection and (b) the data structuring within an iterative process are the main activities for the occupational analysis. The factors which influence this stage are the competences of the analyst, the availability of the information sources and the analysed occupation type.

Data collection is a time consuming activity, implying to find relevant sources of information, watching one or more individual/s performing their tasks in different contexts and on different sites. Moreover, the analyst should get relevant and appropriate competences for the analyzed occupation, even a personal experience, which helps in finding the best techniques and sources of information.

On the other hand, the sources of information should be credible, objective and multiple. The analysis is not intended to describe a specific job into a specific organisation, but a specific occupation within an industry. Thus, the analysis could start from the peculiarity, but have to identify the items (activities, functions, knowledge, skills, attitude etc.) which are relevant for all the entities belonging to the industry.

The occupation type has a tremendous influence on the data collection (for instance jobs as diver versus public relation officer or hair stylist versus court clerk), in other words practically occupations versus intellectual professions.

The collected data are miscellaneous and could refer to different items, so it is necessary to be categorised from the beginning. ANC set up a methodology in this matter focused on the functional analysis, as it stated in its documents (Guides, Methodologies and Annexes). But practically, the output of this first stage points out that the mixed method is used around the *major function concept*.

The *data analysis stage* follows the occupational analysis.

4. Data analysis

Based on collected data, the analyst should identify the following items: major functions; specific activities; activities outcomes; qualitative benchmarks which are connected to the outcomes; theoretical knowledge; skills; attitude; the context in which the major functions and specific activities take place; levels of responsibility.

Major functions or *very important activities* within an occupation are generally speaking connected to a group of responsibilities or tasks, are highly relevant for

the occupational area, but not connected to the methods, technologies or contexts and in the end these define the competences.

A well-defined major function should be deployed into a large range of contexts, conditions and sites, should be neither too complex nor too simple (simplistic) and should be evaluated and certified. Moreover, in order to fulfil such tasks, the job holder should have a core of knowledge and skills, transferable to other contexts.

For instance 'Marketing for the bank's products and services' and 'Retail loans management' are two major functions for the banking officer occupation, and in the case of a more practical occupation, a major function should be 'Maintenance of the IT equipments'.

An activity as „change the toner to HP printers” does not comply with the definitions and the characteristics of a major function (it is too simplistic, does not imply a group of generic knowledge and skills, does specify a type of device and around this „task” cannot be defined the simplest competence).

The number of major functions varies depending on the complexity of a job. For instance there are five major functions in the case of the banking officer.

The specific activities and their outcomes are the components of each major function. For some jobs the identification of the outcomes leads to the definition of the activities, for others the problem is more complex, especially in those jobs requiring a high level of responsibilities. For instance the activities of the major function 'Maintenance of the IT equipments' could be: (1) the cleaning of the devices, (2) the replacing of the spare parts, (3) the making of backup copies, (4) the running of the antivirus programmes etc.

The activities of the major function 'Retail loans management' could be: (1) the analysis of the required documents, (2) the drawing of the specific documents for crediting process, (3) the recording of the loans and collateral into the IT system etc.

Each well defined activity should have a qualitative benchmark, describing the lowest acceptable level on the labour market and, generally speaking, it is related to regulations, norms and standards of the outcomes.

The qualitative benchmarks should be clear, concise, measurable, achievable, applicable in all the contexts and realistic.

There are situations when the identification of the qualitative benchmarks is very difficult to be described clear, concise, measurable, achievable, applicable in all the contexts and realistic. In fact, the qualitative benchmarks carry a certain degree of subjectivity. This is the case of the services industries (including financial sector), where for the customer, the quality is a perceived element, depending on his or her experience, social environment and education (for instance the banks' clients with a high level of financial education

are more sophisticated, demanding very high qualitative services). For instance the outcome of the activity 'cleaning of the devices' is clean equipments, and the qualitative benchmark is 'according to the maintenance instructions from the technical documentation of each device'.

The outcome of the activity 'the analysis of the required documents' is that the documentation was analysed and the qualitative benchmarks are: according to the internal procedures concerning the credit and guarantee processes; according to the client and loan types; according to the National Bank of Romania' regulations concerning the credit risk and the clients classification; according to the level of competences described in the job description.

5. Knowledge, skills and attitude

Based on the activities, outcomes and qualitative benchmarks, the analyst moves to the next phase, namely the identification of the required knowledge and skills for every major function. In this phase it is necessary to review the collected data and to discuss with the managers and practitioners.

The tendency, especially for intellectual professions, is to identify a great number of knowledge, from the highly theoretical to the practical ones. In order to eliminate no required and redundant knowledge, the analyst should bear in mind that:

- There have been defined eight key competences, among them calculus, basic competences in science and technology, digital, social and civic, cultural awareness and expression competences.
- There have been defined general competences for each industry. For instance within the banking industry these are three: (1) Application of the legal provision on safety and health at work and in emergency situations; (2) Application of the customer due diligence (CDD); (3) Application of the rules to ensure the security of bank information.

According to the Official Journal of the European Union „knowledge means the outcome of the assimilation of information through learning. Knowledge is the body of facts, principles, theories and practices that is related to a field of work or study”. The concept of knowledge could be interpreted as theoretical and factual.

In fact knowledge includes facts, principles and concepts. The concept of skill refers to practical aspects of using the cognitive acquired facts, principles and concepts, as well as personal traits (talents).

The competence goes beyond knowledge and skills:

- it allows a person to prove the ability to behave autonomously in performing a task;
- it allows a person to take responsibility for completing a task;

- it allows a person to interact with others to complete a task;
- it allows a person to use appropriate devices, equipments, materials, instruments, etc., in order to complete a task;
- it allows a person to use previous experiences and to modify them according to the current situation;
- it allows a person to impose changes, either due to the current situation or as a stated goal.

All previous descriptions include also an element which links the knowledge and skill, namely the attitude (or behaviour). The attitude can be defined as a social skill, so it is very difficult to precisely separate the two concepts. Thus, the competence itself can be seen as personal and social competence.

6. Conclusions

The paper work investigated occupational standards from conceptual point of view and the elaboration approach, as well as the economic and social functions. The knowledge-based society imposes the assimilation of new information, new skills and attitudes, continuously, in a word, long life learning for the workforce. The Classical School (universities included) should adapt to these challenges, together with the training providers. The accumulation of knowledge from different domains has proved to be pointless, as long as the stock of information cannot be used in the practical activities. The identification of the competences becomes vital for the training and education processes, as the competence itself is, in fact, beyond the accumulation of knowledge and skills. The competence allows an individual to behave autonomously, to take responsibility, to interact with others, to take risks and appropriate safety measurements, to act as a self-starter, to communicate effectively, to solve problems, and so on. The acquired experience during practicing an occupation/profession should be recognised as a valuable asset for an employee, beyond certificates and diplomas.

The independent awarding bodies are essential partners in restoring the confidence in professional training and in School, as their evaluation is based on the job requirements, on the tasks benchmarks established by the practitioners, enhancing the workforce quality.

Thus, the transparency, realism, fairness and objectivity in the evaluation process are important assets for integrating individuals into the labour market.

Unlike other domains, Romania has adopted the national qualification framework (NQF), has established the institutional and legal framework, has implemented the occupational and qualification standards, has elaborated the methodologies and trained people to analyse and write occupational standards, as well as qualification standards. The portfolio of occupational standards is impressive. There have been issued methodologies to accredit the training providers and awarding bodies. The market of the training providers became transparent, competitive and properly regulated, so far, and the stakeholders' voice counts.

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Abbreviations

ACPART - National Agency for the Qualifications in Higher Education and Partnership with the economical and social sector
ANC - National Authority for Qualifications
Cedefop – European Centre for Development of Vocational Training
CNCIS - Qualifications Framework in Higher Education
CNFPA - National Council for Professional Training of the Adult
EQF - European Qualification Framework
NOS – National Occupational Standards