

# Volunteering and Benefits for Youth Employment

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## Introduction

Recent times seem to have enhanced the validity of the outworn phrase that most important things in life are not taught at school. The ever faster changing face of the economy is imposing demands of skills and knowledge to which the formal and sizeable educational systems are less and less in a position to respond. The classical criticism of education and training as not being adapted to the demands of the market is reinventing itself multidimensionally as the pace of new technologies imposes need for adaptation on almost daily basis. Education can no longer be seen as a one-time event/process before the start of working life but as a life-long process requiring ever greater flexibility (Mitchell, 1998). The new knowledge economy presents itself as an era of enormous opportunities, but at the same time of greater risks, less security, widening gaps, and increased possibility for the exclusion of the individual.

Youth appear to be especially vulnerable in this context, especially youth coming from societies still undergoing thorough and traumatic processes of transition. The statistics on youth unemployment in Southeast Europe (SEE) give a devastating picture of despair. Beyond this, within the boundaries of the European Union (EU) the numbers of unemployed youth have been a rising cause of concern. Globally, youth unemployment threatens to position itself as an urgent priority on the development agenda as estimated 1, 2 billion young people are expected to enter the labor market in the next decade (ILO, 2003). The question is what needs to be done in order to give these young people a chance for meaningful and productive lives? What measures need to be taken and who bears the responsibility? How to increase the individual effort over one's wellbeing and how to facilitate a more synergetic action of the social partners?

The issue of youth unemployment is these days always related to the issue of skills and the process of transition. The argument regarding skills revolves around the question how well equipped young people are to compete for jobs in the labor market? The process of transition, especially transition from education to work is seen as critical to the prospects of youth for productive adulthood. The focus on skills reveals the phenomenon of mismatch or shortage of relevant skills. This means that young people cannot find jobs while at the same time there are vacancies that cannot be filled. Some estimates done by the European Commission speculate with around 1, 6 million unfilled posts in the EU in 2002 (Orr, 2000). This is a phenomenon that persists globally.

Research points out that the unsuccessful period of transition from education to work, that would extend into longer first-time unemployment (over a 1 year period) can cause serious and what more hard-wearing decline of productivity of the individual that will persist long into adulthood. The decline of productivity is only one aspect of the problem. Unemployment can lead to marginalization, social isolation, loss of civic identity, and engagement in illegal activity. The lack of proper skills, the mismatch between what employers need and what education and training offer is one highlighted cause for the pronounced difficulties in the school to work transition.

On a macro level and in very simplified terms youth unemployment is a facet of general unemployment. Basically, it exists because of insufficient supply of work, because the economy cannot produce enough jobs (ILO, 2001). There are analyses and interventions that deal with this problem on a macro economic level, such as interest rates, policies for labor intensive growth, and so on. These aspects are beyond the scope of this paper and thus are only simply mentioned.

The issue of skills or better lack of them can be observed on several levels, macro, meso and micro level, if the country perspective taken. On macro level it addresses the general rules and conditions that define and shape the context. The most prominent role here is the one of the government as the actor with the strongest say as to the establishing of the features of the educational and vocations system, the labor legislation and some ground market rules. On a meso level it can be analyzed through the action of the many different institutional actors that are concerned in one way or another, such as employers, vocational centers, training centers, intermediaries of different profile. On a micro level it emphasizes the responsibility and the action of the individual over self -development for maximizing his/her chances on the job market. All of these levels interweave through a process of continuous social dialogue, however each level can be observed separately. What is of particular interest to this paper is the possibility for individual action and some possible modes for undertaking it.

Why aren't skills sufficient? What used to be enough 10 years ago is now not sufficient. The new economy requires workers who are able to deal with an increased set of problems. The skills that were in the past necessary only for managerial staff are now required also for the technical personnel. Employers expect also technical staff to be able to solve problems, propose solutions, think creatively. Job descriptions are expanding. At the same time, one set of skills for one work process is no longer enough. Increased flexibility is required under the pressure of rapidly changing economy and workers are expected to be able to adapt and adapt quickly. It is no longer just the skills you possess but the capacity to upgrade them and adapt them continuously that is important. Life long employment is diminishing, people have to change jobs and that means acquiring new skills. This reflects on the individual in different ways; labor becomes more valuable but also workers become more vulnerable as they might not possess the skills that are needed to go through the changes (Mitchell, 1998).

There are many diverse factors that interplay towards this end. The vertical disintegration of companies in the new economy, which keep the core competences and subcontract the peripheral ones; the competition for productivity that abandons the mass and orients to leaner and more flexible modes of production; market liberalization and deregulation; the rapidly increased mobility of factors of production (Mitchell, 1998). And probably the most important ones, the new information and communication technologies (ICT) that increasingly globalize the world. The reasons further branch into country or region specificities. What goes for the EU does not necessarily apply to the rest of Europe. The SEE would for example suffer some of these problems in aggravated forms part due to the expanding gap, part due to the still unfinished processes of transition. The shortage of skills can exist in different contexts, it can be a shortage of senior professionals or entry level positions, it can be a shortage of technical or management skills, it can be about a lack of experience or lack of certification, it can be a shortage of job – specific skills or of transferable or portable skills that are central to many different jobs and occupations.

When talking of youth employability the issue of skills shortage combines with the issue of work experience that further contributes to the vulnerability of youth as entrants on the job market.<sup>1</sup> The chicken and egg puzzle of employers preferring to hire someone with some and certain work experience, as opposed to the situation of one not being able to get it unless first hired describes the difficulty of that critical first step into the job market. How to go about it?

Numerous models have been designed to tackle this particular aspect of the youth unemployment problem, the first time unemployment. . Training and re-training schemes, vocational and professional orientations, apprenticeship, internship, probations and traineeship programs, in-school or on-the-job trainings, school – business partnerships and so on. . These are all programs aimed at the supply side, on

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<sup>1</sup> There are many available definitions of employability. In simple terms it is a possession of skills that increase the chances for employment.

the supply of labor. Programs that aim at improving the characteristics of labor in order to make it more suitable to employers' need. What is often quoted as a very successful model is the German dual apprenticeship system within which young people at the same time attend classes and work as apprentices with a company (Nagi, 2002). Germany is a rare exception from the point of view of youth unemployment as the youth unemployment rate is the same and in some sub categories almost lower than the adult unemployment rate, as opposed to the regular parity of the former being double or more than the latter (O, Higgins, 1997). This model ensures easy entry into jobs; however it is sometimes criticized for its rigidity.

There are models that work on the demand side, on job creation. Such are the models that offer different kinds of incentives and subsidies to employers in order to employ youth or certain categories of youth who are especially vulnerable. The so called wage subsidies comprise tax or benefits exemptions or deductions. These models are popular in SEE as most of the countries employ them (European Training Foundation, 2000). Many of the models that work on the supply side, and try to facilitate the school to work transition, focus on remedying for the lack of work experience and skills that are either developed or practiced through working experience. This brings us to the particular phenomenon that is in many ways relevant to such models and can represent one strong vehicle - volunteering.

### Focus

Notwithstanding the theoretical dispute over volunteering driven solely by genuine altruism vs. volunteering that might incorporate other motives, including personal satisfaction, or personal development, or vs. volunteering that is influenced by peer pressure or undertaken because of social obligation, there are quite some similarities between the traditional “ciraklak”<sup>2</sup> and what we might call volunteering for work (Street, 1994). Cirak was (and still is) an apprentice who labors (usually) without compensation in a craftsman’s workshop in exchange for acquiring and recognition (usually informal) of certain skills. This laboring is of course voluntary though it might be easily result of family instruction or influence. The stark difference with today's volunteering for work is the legitimacy of the beneficiary, as today the beneficiary would have a more meriting need. As such, this apprenticeship model is a centuries old mechanism for entering the world of work and it is a forerunner of both vocational education and modern apprenticeship programs. The cirak who works in the craftsman’s workshop, over time, if he/she is a good learner and worker, might move up and be promoted and start getting a salary, or after having gained enough skills and independence, might go into work for him or herself. So the model, apart from being a tool for getting skills, can also offer an opportunity for a direct placement in a job or individual entrepreneurial engagement, that is self-employment.

This will be our lens to view volunteering for work; as an equipper and booster of employability, as a possible direct link to getting a job, and as bouncing board into entrepreneurship. Abreast, it adds value to the beneficiary/host organization, the direct target beneficiaries, the community and society at large.

The skills that volunteering can add are as diverse as the very experience of volunteering can be. The possibilities are endless. One very basic dichotomy of skills already mentioned above, is skills that are specific to a particular job and transferable skills that are important for every job, or many different types of job, as they are of more generic character. Often they are also referred to as core skills, soft skills, portable skills etc. The definitions and conceptions would often overlap, blur differences and be used as interchangeable. This is not of prior importance for this paper. Skills that are often listed by different kinds of employers as important include communication, leadership and team works skills, critical thinking and problem solving, organizational and self management skills. Often the young job applicant will have a satisfactory portfolio of the technical, job-specific skills but will lack the core skills and will be taken over by somebody with more experience. Most of these skills are not plausibly

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<sup>2</sup> Cirak means apprentice in Macedonian and several other Balkan languages. The word most probably comes from Turkish.

transferable in a classroom. Some of them depend on an inherent personal endowment and the need to be exercised in a real life environment in order to be promoted. Other are only learned by doing and some are so crucially dependent on experience and diversity. Employees are expected to be good with prose and to be good with numbers, to be able to handle documents and to find their way around with charts and tables. They need to use computers well and be prompt in thinking of a solution. They need to be able to work in a team and they need to be able to use community resources smartly and resourcefully (The Conference Board of Canada, 2004). They need to be resourceful themselves. A person who has had volunteering experience in different environments is better equipped for example to use community resources such as concepts of time, orientation, handling organizational cultures, and to adapt to different rules and procedures. Adaptation is not easy, it is hard. People buy into the habits of the daily life and find it difficult to change. And it is as hard for organizations as it is for individuals. The concept of "handling documents", once certainly more rigid and conventional on account of its sturdiness and durability is now both an end in itself and a prerequisite for any kind of advancement in responsibility. The ICT had not just exploded it, it is more like there is an eruption once a week. In exaggerated terms, a manager who would take a month of unpaid leave, upon return to the office could find her/himself in a position not to be able to open a new format. And more than a stock of knowledge, it takes the understanding that constant learning is needed. Volunteering experience can add adaptability and flexibility, important qualities in the modern economy.

An employer doesn't assess the job applicant insularly but as a prospective contributor to the team. In this regard, also the volunteer is a contributor to the team and he/she is in a position to gain but also to contribute to the team. There are parallel processes of drawing and adding of knowledge as reciprocal, mutual relationships are created (UNDP, 2003). These exchanges are by no means balanced. Sometimes the contribution of a volunteer expert to a young organization can be invaluable. Other times a young volunteer will be able to offer only an alternative, youthful point of view in exchange for priceless experience, insights and skills. The issue of balance of the exchange is of particular interest to the planning of the volunteering and is of relevance to the personal motivation of both the volunteer and the host organization.

Other important aspect of the benefits of volunteering regards the effect on attitudes, behaviors and values, and the psychosocial aspects of individual health. The search for a job can be a callous experience. It takes self esteem and resilience to be successful. Volunteering creates the sense of self worth and instills self esteem. It gives the very important feeling of being needed as through volunteering somebody is offered help, which is by itself a very rewarding experience for the helper (Street, 1994). Youth who are jobless for a considerable time start to develop the feeling that they are not needed and this is the way to self isolation. It can easily be argued that the effect on attitudes and behaviors is at least as important as the impact on skills. These processes of self development are mutually reinforcing. The acquiring of skills gives confidence which in turn bolsters even harder learning. It is not only skills that make a good professional. Indeed they may be even secondary to the right attitudes and behaviors. Attitudes and behaviors encompass a wide range of qualities from simple punctuality and readiness to stay extra hours to keeping an open mind and expressing readiness to both learn and teach. Volunteering is not a magical panacea that can just bequeath all the right virtues to whatever individual who decides to donate a portion of time. It is however a healthy process of ethical learning and has the mandate to assess qualities, that can feed back both into the volunteer track record and the inner personal benchmarking system saying what weaknesses have to be worked on.

In addition, volunteering can represent an important trial period and provide the opportunity to experiment and put preferences to practice (Street, 1994). In this way it is a step beyond the professional and vocational orientation offered in schools and employment centers. Indeed people, especially young people, are not sure about the right path, and as the new times offer a plethora of opportunities the right path is even more uncertain. A person is entitled to a try. Needless to say that

professional choices can relate to identity in a very primordial way and by that can be essential to fulfillment. On the other hand they often take a lot of courage especially if the road is not devoid of risk. Volunteering can be a vital facilitator in this regard. A person can have a free shot of what she/he preferences first and then go being a doctor or a lawyer. And this is not pertinent only to career beginning. Retraining can successfully be strategized through volunteer engagement even concurrently with a full time job, for example through seasonal or flexible part times. It therefore is a tool for developing or revealing additional talents and skills.

Employability is enhanced by strengthening the core skills (Mitchell, 1998). Employers will often be reluctant to invest too much in core skills as they are transferable. Also, they would be more inclined to invest in skills that guarantee profit in the short term as opposed to ones that mean investment in the long term productivity of the worker. The readiness to invest in training will also depend on the capacity and the size of the employer. Governments at the same time, have a limited capacity to contribute and this capacity decreases even more during economic recession. This is some of the reasoning for the pragmatic paradigm of assuming individual responsibility for employability enhancement, and volunteerism is but one tool available.

However, individual development can not be an isolated process. It has to be integrated with institutional support in order to be successful (Kitigawa, 2001). The problem is the lack of the support from the part of the relevant social partners, from reasons already mentioned. The business doesn't care and sometimes can not, the government doesn't know and its capacity can vary. Again volunteering can be observed as a possible platform, as an interface between the individual vis-à-vis the business and the government, grounded on stronger personal responsibility. The government can put a sound framework in place and offer the incentive to the business. The individual will have a greater role to play in making the choices. This is by no means a neo liberal absolutism, but merely a pragmatic reasoning. And it is a reasoning that is widely accepted. More and more people volunteer today as part of their search for employment (Street, 1994).

The second idea this paper tries to explore looks at volunteering as a lobby to getting directly into an office. That is, placing young people directly from volunteering into jobs. It is more of a common talk than a relevant statistics that the vast majority of jobs, according to some almost 80%, are not advertised (Street, 1994). Regardless of the exact number, the fact exists that many posts are filled without public ads. This could mean that employers are able to effectively get the skilled people they need without wide searches, though this is a bit of an overstatement. One of the often pointed weaknesses of small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) is their inefficient approach to recruitment. Some theorists had looked into hiring practices as a means of exploring societal ties, with a conclusion that many jobs are acquired through weak ties, that is to say, contacts that are not particularly close (Granovetter, 1973). The bottom argument is that volunteering in addition to augmenting the human capital also builds the social capital endowment of the individual. It serves as a useful tool for creating and maintaining useful contacts in the world of work.

In many cases happens that the volunteer starts to work with the same company he/she volunteered for. In some instances the volunteer just becomes an integral part of the team. She/he becomes an important supplement that contributes to the team dynamics. The employer realizes that the gain in effectiveness outstrips the increased staff expenses. This transition can be prompt or gradual. The volunteer can move from part time, to full time with no benefits, until a full fledged status is recognized.

The types of school to work transitions, among many other factors, are molded by cultures. Kitigawa (2001) compares the systems of some of the strongest economies in the world. Germany enjoys a strong cooperation between industry, government, trade unions and education. Thus the best practice dual model that puts young people effectively into jobs. In Japan the corporations embrace and protect the

individual who spends his/her entire life working for the same company in a mutual exchange of protection and absolute loyalty (Fukuyama, 1995). These strong cultural determinants that shape the very character of the economy will have strong impact on the practices and values of volunteering too. This is however beyond our scope.

In other cases the volunteer simply becomes indispensable. For example, a volunteer who over time develops a complicated database is not so easily replaceable. Volunteers will often be given vast technical detail. Often organizations resort to volunteer effort when faced with increased amount of technical detail whose handling with paid labor could exceed their financial strength. Sometimes the volunteer develops a line of activity that the organization finds useful and decides to retain. When hiring, organizations often rather contact a former volunteer than looking for somebody completely new. This saves them costs, effort, time, and unpleasantness of a surprise, in a case the relationship doesn't work.

Volunteering can create jobs or even types of jobs. Sometimes it happens that a type of service is developed originally by volunteer effort and subsequently government or other service providers take over the provision as the awareness grows that the service is vital to the society. The original volunteer effort mobilized in response to the AIDS pandemic urged both governments and other social actors to start with consistent provision of related services, that created thousands of jobs (UN Volunteers, 1999).

When thinking about volunteering as a means for direct placement into jobs, one idea that would be interesting to explore, and that this paper will just outline, is the relationship with the SMEs. They are the backbone of most economies. In the EU they represent over 98% of all companies, over 50% of GDP and account for 2/3 of the total employed work force (Observatory of European SMEs, 2002). At the same time, some of the particular challenges for SMEs pertain to training and staffing, that are central to the issue of skills and skills disconnects. Most SMEs indicate the lack of skills as the main obstacle in work. SMEs do not have the funds and the time for training of their staff, most of the learning is done on the job. According to Kitigawa (2001) SMEs choose to address the skills gap by working harder rather than working smarter. Often they do not possess the capacity to do well-planned recruitment. Basically they are the most vibrant part of a country's economy but also express clear vulnerabilities that need certain kinds of support. The very fact that they are by far the largest type of employer emphasizes their importance to youth unemployment. It would be really interesting to explore those possible interplays that can happen between SMEs and youth who transit from school into work, both on the conjunction of skills shortage lanes and also as processes of incubation of entrepreneurship. What they have in common is that both lack skills. Now, to a large extent these lacks would not be complementary in terms that a mutually productive exchange can take place. Youth will lack the level entry skills whereas the employers would lack the skills needed to adapt certain production or service delivery process for example. The generality of this statement is of course debatable. However, there can be many points of congruence, many chances for happy marriages. Especially if preceded by periods of living together. The fresh up-to-date ICT youthful culture can be really valuable to an SME that runs good production but has somewhat outdated communication procedures for example. The young person learns the traits of the trade and at the same time updates the employer's communication system. Innovation in business will more seldom be radical and more often gradual and incremental. It will often consist of simple new ways of doing things, simple little improvements, that at the end of the day add up to a rise in productivity. . And this is but the simplest possible example, of interest both to youth and small employers.

It is a valid argument that for youth who are interested in entrepreneurship, short volunteering periods with different SMEs can be a very useful experience. It is in an SME that the spirit of entrepreneurship can be really felt and explored. The big companies rely on the executive decisions of professional

managers. These decisions are far both from genuine enterprising and innovation, and also have a different relation to risk. In an SME the young person interested in business can have a first hand practical education about all the aspects that are relevant to business.

Nonetheless, another important argument goes along the line of the point made earlier, and this is the importance of orientation. A young person may have some interest in business but this interest may not be unhesitant. Moreover, the motivation may derive from an inclination to a very particular type of business. A short time with an SME of a certain profile may be the right insight needed, without a risk of failure.

Interest in entrepreneurship in the EU is declining especially among young people. The EC recommended measures for reinforcing the entrepreneurial spirit also by promotion activities in the classroom.<sup>3</sup> Some experts argue that entrepreneurship can not be taught but that it is innate and it can only be instigated. If that is true then the best place to do it is in the right type of environment. It takes the right context to awaken and promote the right attitude towards entrepreneurship.

Lastly, as only of sideway relevance to this paper, volunteering is one of the facilitators of linkages among businesses. In an anecdotal testimony of a volunteer from Macedonia, a student of food processing technology who went for a volunteership in Denmark, the host managers were very interested in the milk and dairy industry in Macedonia to which he tried to comply by providing extensive data. This ensued in the company from Denmark purchasing the controlling package of a Macedonian milk producer. In this way, even if only indirectly, the volunteering effectuated foreign direct investment. The volunteer got a steady job upon return home.

## Conclusion

Attempting to concentrate mostly on the practical benefits volunteering can give young people, in a particularly important aspect of life, this paper didn't elaborate on the enormous complexity of the processes of transition to work. The variances in their course can be many and influenced by a myriad of factors. A couple of decades ago these transitions were in general terms faster and took place at an earlier age. Over time, and with the gradual decline of jobs in the manufacturing sector, as one of the often quoted factors, they became both postponed and longer (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997). The last few decades also noted, apart from the longer staying in school, the trend of exploding numbers of female enrolment and clear records of better performance of girls as compared to boys. In Europe and not only, girls consistently outperform boys in school. However, their transition in the job market is more difficult. Many jobs are still gender segregated or gender typical although a lot of progress has been made. Girls find it in general more difficult to progress in their careers.

The structure of the economy results in some countries with higher rates of youth unemployment in the high skill cohort, vs. in other with a higher unemployment rates in the low skills cohort. Youth unemployment follows general unemployment but in some countries can happen that youth unemployment can rise in a situation when the overall unemployment is decreasing. The situation becomes more complicated when taken into account the social and cultural stratification of society and the in-country urban to rural divide. Youth from rural areas are far more vulnerable than youth from the capital and their transition looks absolutely different. Marginalized youth face enormous challenges that do not need special reference. Sometimes the imperative of the transition will be to just make it fast, in order to break the welfare cycle, though this might lead to being locked in low paid job without possibilities for exit (Kitigawa, 2001). Youth in more developed countries will be in a position to delay

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<sup>3</sup> The European Charter for SMEs was endorsed by the European Council in Santa Maria de Feira in June 2002. Among other, the Charter pledges for promotion of entrepreneurship in schools.

the transition till the right opportunity comes along, as opposed to youth from a developing one, who will have to scrap a living.

The differences in social status, education, residence, cultural identity, also strongly influence the stance towards volunteerism. Marginalized youth will be less likely to volunteer than youth from the cultural mainstream of society. Youth who are the edge of livelihood will more unlikely find even the time to volunteer, let alone the commitment. The differences at individual level translate into macro level phenomena. Volunteering will differ in a developed from developing country in terms of priorities, structure, organization (Roy & Ziemek, 2000).

However, whatever the context, volunteering appears to be adaptable and able to deliver benefit. One final conclusion is that its importance grows as an important avenue for combating youth unemployment. The possibilities it offers are numerous. It can be molded, customized, tailored to individual needs. It can be full time, part time, weekend of working days, home or abroad, it can differ in intensity and duration. It can be more or less structured and formalized. It can be equally about a frame of mind or culture, and technical improvement. It can serve as a tool to explore preferences, add experience, and strengthen self esteem. It can be an effective interface for combining community effort for mutual benefit. It can open borders, even in the literal sense of the word. It is a strong tool for enhancing individual control over one's life. And more and more young people use it.

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