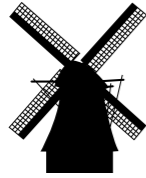


# Youth information worker: a profile

by Imre Simon



*What do the Belgian guy who once wanted to avoid the obligatory military service, the Slovenian one who wished to escape the national bank and the Dutch former lighting technician have in common? They all excel in their field: youth information.*

Even though the urge to change careers is not an obligatory part of becoming a good youth information worker, it is frequent and enriching. Just like several other professions, youth

of it. To our knowledge, no academic degree is currently available that explicitly focuses on youth information, thus coming from different fields is still common, and rather beneficial.

The reason for this is that much in counselling depends on the person. Just as there is no such thing as good or bad language schools but good or bad language teachers, it is not youth information centres that do the job; it is the youth information worker. That's why face-to-face counselling is a unique service.

Let's see what the necessary soft skills are for a youth information worker. The best place to find this out is among the practitioners themselves. At one point participants of ERYICA training courses are asked to "design" the ideal youth information worker. You can see some of their results among the illustrations on these pages.

A recurrent element is open-mindedness, which incorporates other characteristics such as interest, tolerance, knowing one's possibilities as well as limits and most importantly respect towards the young person. It might be surprising that such soft skills are put in the foreground but this exemplifies our preceding statement that personality outweighs a degree.

information and counselling is a job that is best learnt by doing. What is more, besides possessing knowledge and skills, it requires a certain personality and approach. This is one of the reasons why I set out to describe the "unofficial" profile of youth information workers in this article.

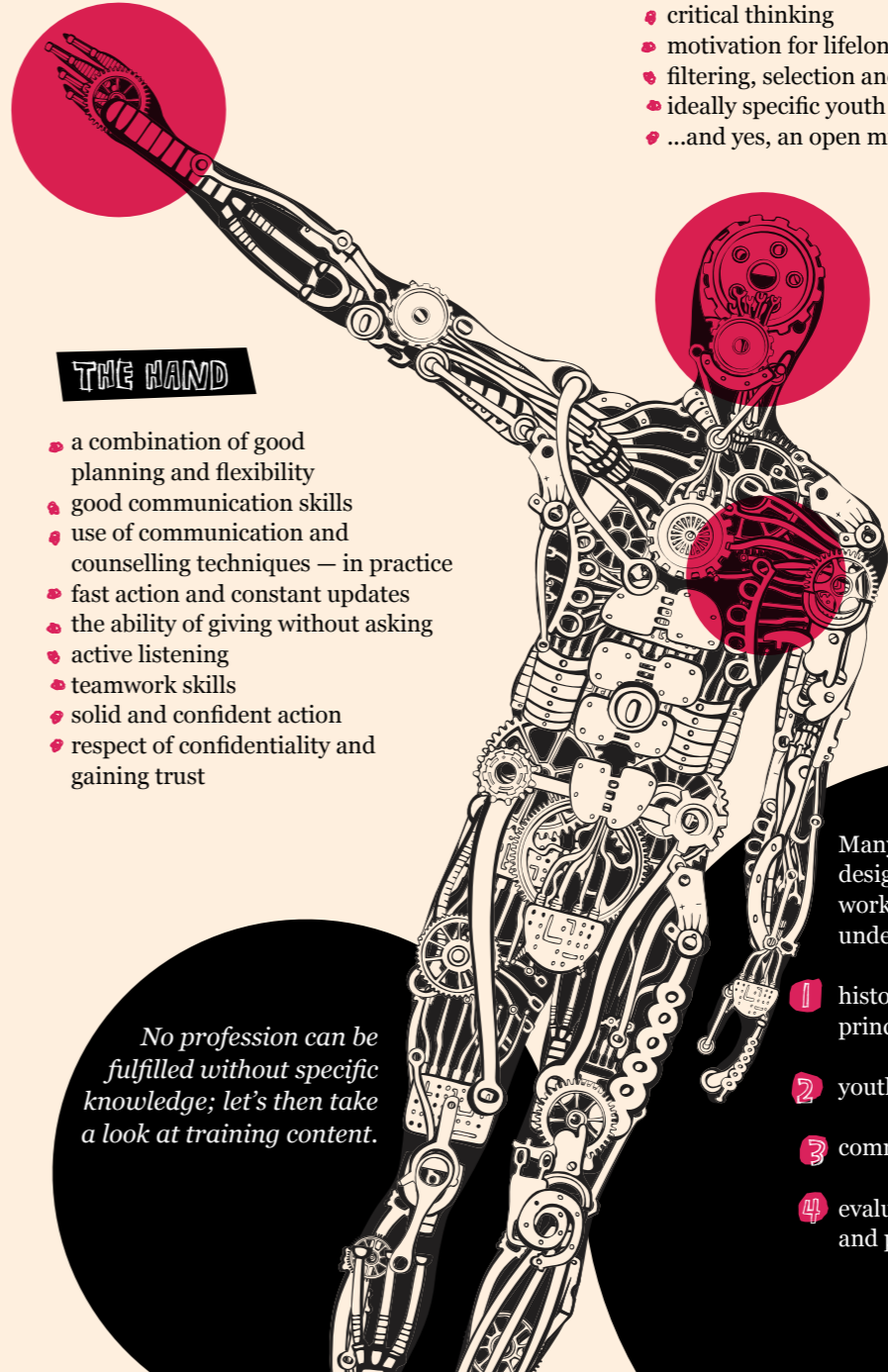
The above-mentioned variety does not only benefit youth information and counselling but it exemplifies some peculiarities of this profession. The first youth information centre was opened in 1961 and as the concept spread, its pioneer professionals did not follow a regular training or career path. Specific training in formal education was not provided until recent years and even though formal training is available in most European countries at the moment, it usually concerns youth work in general and covers youth information and counselling as a minor part



Photo: Information Right Now! Ioana



## The body of our youth information worker



### THE HEAD

- knowledge about people, institutions, tools and methods, the current situation and issues for young people
- critical thinking
- motivation for lifelong learning
- filtering, selection and assessment of information
- ideally specific youth information training
- ...and yes, an open mind!

### THE HAND

- a combination of good planning and flexibility
- good communication skills
- use of communication and counselling techniques – in practice
- fast action and constant updates
- the ability of giving without asking
- active listening
- teamwork skills
- solid and confident action
- respect of confidentiality and gaining trust

### THE HEART

- a welcoming attitude
- a positive approach, charisma
- patience
- care
- respect
- guidance and advice

*No profession can be fulfilled without specific knowledge; let's then take a look at training content.*

Many training courses are designed to prepare youth information workers. Their content can be grouped under four major topics, namely:

- 1 historical and theoretical background and principles of youth information work;
- 2 youth information in practice;
- 3 communication and work with young people;
- 4 evaluation, promotion, quality control and possibilities for development.

## Youth information worker: a profile

### 1. HISTORY

Knowing one's history is important in every situation and a relatively young profession is no exception to that. In our case, the beginning of this history dates back only to the days when the specific needs of young people were recognised. Do you remember the Beatles? Their hairstyles provoked scandals but they were wearing suits and ties – just like everyone else those days. It is just after this time that young people were recognised as a distinct target group and that is when our history starts. The principles of the European Youth Information Charter (1993, revised in 2004) and the Principles for Online Youth Information (2009) also deserve mention here.

### 2. YOUTH INFORMATION IN PRACTICE

On the practice side, youth information workers need to be aware of young people's information needs (a constantly moving target), find and select quality information, organise and design it appropriately for the target group and – the most difficult of all – get it through to them.

### 3. COMMUNICATION - THE ART OF WORKING WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Besides the knowledge of communication techniques and principles, the particular setting of counselling requires confidence in one's professionalism, having sensitive topics, trust and confidentiality issues in mind. A youth counsellor also needs to be an excellent diplomat, as the real issues of young people are usually not spoken out directly but can be deduced.

### 4. QUALITY, PROMOTION AND DEVELOPMENT

A particularly important aspect is quality. Guidelines, insurance, control, (self-) assessment, logos and seals of approval are being created to ensure the same quality in youth information networks – a service that has to be promoted as well as constantly developed – just as everything else. In the beginning of this article we mentioned some examples of youth information workers who had unusual career paths. This variety is present on the "other side of the counter" too, as information is not always obtained from people who provide it as a profession. Youth workers are present in most countries of Europe, even though they work in different contexts and carry out different activities. Some of them provide information on free-time activities, others work in a country-specific system of youth houses or "playgrounds", whereas others hit the streets and go where the target group is. They all work with young people and as soon as they earn their confidence, they receive questions and they are expected to provide answers. We call these colleagues, from the youth information and counselling point of view, youth information mediators or "Jimmies".

This concept is of Dutch origin, hence the name "Jongeren Informatie Medewerker" (or Jimmy). Its underlying principle is the creation of a bridge between youth work and youth information, increasing the outreach of the latter, as well as the capacities of the former. Jimmies are trained to provide basic youth information, as part of their work, in a professional way as well as in co-operation with youth information centres.

The characteristics of the two ways of providing youth information are compared in the table below:

YOUTH INFORMATION WORKER	YOUTH INFORMATION MEDIATOR (JIMMY)
works at a youth information centre	works as a youth worker in various settings, in a youth house, street work, outreach work, etc.
the main scope of work is the provision of youth information and counselling	works with young people and provides youth information and counselling as an implicit part of this activity
is more confronted with young people's "difficulties" and challenges during growing up	accompanies young people during a certain period
provides information, offers counselling	is asked for information and advice
focuses on one particular person at a time	often works with groups of people
"piece work", short cycle	sees the development of a young person
has several tools (materials, web, techniques...)	refers to the youth information centre
youth information is the core activity	youth information is a tool for youth work

These two groups are the main professional providers of youth information and counselling. As our recent experience shows, the co-operation between them is interesting for both parties involved and most importantly, benefits young people.

In its relatively short history, youth information and counselling work has already undergone a fundamental change. Instead of youth information centres being a "storeroom" of information, giving ultimate answers to those who request it, youth information workers now help young people find their way in the information jungle and provide face-to-face counselling which is unique in the field. And most probably, changes for youth information workers will be faster than ever – because this is the case for their target group.

To succeed in this, undergraduates are prepared by the former Welsh punk, once a regular and admittedly problematic visitor of a youth centre, who now teaches future youth workers at the University of Birmingham. This is what youth information and counselling is all about: not only a change of careers but a change of life.

