Student organization as a space for development of future professional career

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ABSTRACT

As the contemporary labor market is constantly changing, employees have to observe and analyze this process in order to be prepared for developing professional career. Finding own place on this market is especially challenging for young people, who are just entering it. That is why they are looking for different methods to get ready for their future professional career. There are many different options to be prepared. One of them seems to be a membership of student organization. The results of the research show that AIESEC, as an example of student organization, creates a space for future professional career development. It should be noted that student organization members realize it sometime after starting their attendance at this organization. Before joining it, they do not consider a fact of being an AIESEC member as part of future professional career development. Students develop in this organization mainly management skills, team working and leadership skills.

Keywords: career development, generations, student organization

1. INTRODUCTION

Work is integral part of everybody’s life, which is no longer perceived only as a way of earning money needed for everyday expenses. It has started to be considered as a way of self-realization - not as sad duty, but pleasure. Thanks to still rising level of education, media and internet influence, people are more aware of existing opportunities, they want to gain
knowledge and develop, use their strengths in order to pursue careers. Because of that process, the competition between candidates and employees on the labor market is constantly growing. That is why from the very beginning of their careers people are looking for ways to distinguish themselves among others, being ordinary is no longer enough. It is especially visible among young people who are looking for their first job. They are trying to make themselves valuable for employers in many ways, that is why volunteering, part-time jobs or student organizations are getting more popular. The purpose of the paper is to answer the following research questions: Is student organization a space for career development? Is there a space in student organization to develop competences demanded in future professional career? What kind of competences can be developed in student organization?

2. BASIC CONSIDERATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Career and its development

There are many definitions of career presented in academic journals. Arthur (2008, p. 166) define career as the evolving sequence of a person’s work experience over time. It is a very broad but at the same time universal definition. It includes both paid and unpaid work and it leaves out references to advancement as a prerequisite for success. Career path unfolds over time in steps that may or may not be linear. It may span across several professions as well as different organizations. Each step of professional life can influence the next ones in expected or unexpected way.

McDonald and Hite (2008) underline that last two decades have been characterized by turbulent environment what influenced career development process causing the changes in nature of careers (e.g. increasingly boundaryless and protean). Career models share as a feature that modern careers are less restricted by organizational boundaries and characterized by discontinuity (Kuen, Nesbit & Ahlstrom, 2013).

Organizational restructuring and change affects, and is affected by, worker’s career-driven responses (Currie, Tempest & Starkey, 2006). Contemporary careers are much more fragmented than they used to be, so much that it is generally claimed that they follow ‘boundaryless career’ arrangements (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). It implies a fundamental shift in the psychological contract because both parties (employer and employee) become aware that the employing relationship is unlikely to last forever (Arthur, Khapova and Wilderom, 2005).

Polly Parker (2002, p. 83) summarize careers as a provider of a link between the inner world of self and the outer world of society. This link is an important one, because it is through their careers that many people seek personal meaning in their lives. However, the contemporary work environment is persistently changing, and the markers that once guided career paths are becoming increasingly blurred. In a world characterized by change and uncertainty, careers are critical to self – development, perhaps more than ever before.

Employee’s identity is built on his/her competences which are offered to a company. If both parties are interested in a cooperation, a contract is signed. It is not a company which is responsible for employee development. People start to be aware of the fact that they are responsible for career development and employability.

Employees have taken ownership of their careers, responsibility for their development and accountability for their performance.
They stopped acting like pawns in the hands of corporate chessmasters and began behaving more like free-agent owners and investors of their own human capital (Tittenburn, 2017, p. 29).

In this paper research are based on the assumption that everyone feels a need of carrier development, which according to Patton (2001, p. 14) is the process of managing learning and work over the lifespan. Increasingly there has been acknowledgement that career development is a lifespan process where paid employment is embedded in the complex systems that represent the lives of people. Although one can say about continuity of the career, we should also realize its division.

Career is connected with passing time, ageing, getting more experienced. According to Greenhaus et al (1994, p.334-336), career can be divided into four stages:

1) Occupational and Organizational Choice (initially age 18-30, then variable) during which individuals forming starts as well as the process of finding preferred occupations. At this stage people access possible occupations, select a particular one, and obtain the necessary education.

2) Early Career (age 25-45) during which individuals learn job, learn organizational roles and norms, increase competences and pursue career goals. One of the obstacles during stage two is assimilating into organization’s culture.

3) The Mid-Career (Age 40-60) starts at the same moment as the midlife transition. That is why at this stage individual has to face the re-examination of its choices made during the early and mid-career. People who overcome obstacles connected with this stage (such as technical obsolescence) remain productive, otherwise they experience frustration and job stagnation.

4) The Late-Career (Age 55- Retirement) when individuals includes two main obstacles: finding a way to maintain same level of self-esteem and cooperating with emotional, financial and social changes connected with process of retirement.

Age is one of the main determinant of career stages and development. Employees’ abilities, competences and expectations are changing. They are different for young and older people. They are also determined by the experiences which are common for groups of people – different generations. Young, well educated people, start to plan their career on the first stage of Greenhaus’ model. They not only make decision about field of study but also start their professional or quasi-professional activity in different types of organizations.

2. 2. Generations

While analyzing career in details, one can come to the conclusion that career models are differentiated on the basis of generation division. According to Hansen and Leuty (2012), the term generation typically refers to a group of individuals (employees) who share common work or life experiences. There are three main working generations on a labor market nowadays: Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. Differences between careers models come from the social, cultural and historical conditions each of these generations had to face. A short characteristics of the generations is needed to understand difference between them and their way of thinking about career development.

Baby Boomers (one can find other cut-off dates, according to Gardiner, Grace and King (2015), it is the generation of people born between 1946 and 1964) who experienced the Vietnam World, Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Liberations
Movement, influenced by access to television and rock and roll. They are characterized as loyal to their employers, dedicated and workaholics (Kupperschmidt 2000; Wieck 2005; Apostolidis and Polifroni 2006).

*Generation X* (born between 1965 and 1979) was experienced by The Persian Gulf War, the Challenger explosion, AIDS, tripling of the divorce rate, both parents working or video games. Having grown up in the presence of computers, Xers are adept with technology, synthesizing diverse information to gain knowledge and understanding (Stuenkel, de la Cuesta and Cohen 2005). They are characterized as being independent, seeking emotional security, preferring informality, and having more entrepreneurial skills than Baby Boomers (Howe and Strauss 2007).

*Generation Y* *(called also Millenial Generation- born between 1980 and 2000)*, experiencing terrorism, environmentalism, cell phones, text messages and social networking based on technology. A key formative characteristic for Gen Y is early and frequent exposure to technology, which has advantages and disadvantages in terms of cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes (Immordino-Yang et al., 2012). Moreover, they are willing to work in teams, and due to their high skills in use of ICT they can work across borders, globally. In such a form of work also helps them tolerance and openness to other lifestyles, cultures and ideologies. Because they like to get the concretized tasks (are task oriented), so they rarely show their creativity in finding solutions. Additionally they are become quickly discouraged when they tend to solutions and faced with difficulties. (Stanimir, 2015) Going further, Gursoy et al. (2008) suggest that Gen Y expects from their superiors to indicate how to proceed, which results in a lack of ability to make critical decisions. Differences between generations are presented in table 1.

**Table 1.** Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y – comparison.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baby Boomers</th>
<th>Generation X</th>
<th>Generation Y</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sandwich generation</td>
<td>Latch-key kids</td>
<td>Netters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company loyalty</td>
<td>Lack of loyalty</td>
<td>“Contract” mentality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idealistic</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Civic-minded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-absorbed</td>
<td>Self-reliant</td>
<td>Self-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workaholic</td>
<td>Work/life balance</td>
<td>Multi-taskers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech conservatives</td>
<td>Computer savvy</td>
<td>Tech experts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entitled</td>
<td>Cynical/skeptical</td>
<td>Easily bored</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional family</td>
<td>Divorced family</td>
<td>Many family forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wary of authority</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Crave feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Entrepreneurial</td>
<td>Serial Entrepreneurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Materialistic</td>
<td>Fun-loving</td>
<td>Volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Life-long learning</td>
<td>Distance learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable with change</td>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>Crave challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimistic</td>
<td>Want fulfilling work</td>
<td>High maintenance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security oriented</td>
<td>Career options</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As research conducted by Nielsen (Global Generational Lifestyles, 2015) shows, Millenials are two times more likely to leave their current jobs after 2 years compared to Generation X. In case of Millenials this probability is 41%, when it comes to Baby Boomers it is equal to 26%, for Generation X it is 21%. It shows that Generation Y is more used to frequent job changing. People from different generations develop their professional career in different way. Millenials are the example of generation with high self-esteem and high job expectation. They are entering job market very early (just after secondary school or during study period) and they expect fast success. To achieve it, to be competitive on the job market, they start their career in different ways. Some become paid employees, but some become unpaid workers as volunteers or members of student organizations. The question arises if young people treat their membership in this type organization as a possibility to start career development? and if student organization is a space for competences development?

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research is based on quantitative method. Data was collected by survey method (CAWI and paper questionnaires) which was distributed among members of international student organization. Questionnaire consisted of thirteen open and close ended questions. It was anonymous. Respondents are in age 18-30, which means that they are on the first stage of their careers (Occupational and Organizational Choice). They are Millenial generation - it means that they are more open to job changes, diversified working environment and are used to cooperating with technology.

Research was conducted in AISEC Poland, which is an example of international student organization. Questionnaire was filled up by 85 members (sample, n=85). Sample counted 96,5% of Polish citizens, and 3,5% of foreigners. Among sample there was 74,1% of bachelor students, 17,6% master students and 8,2% of people who currently do not study at all. Survey was conducted among people with different seniority and positions on the national level in AIESEC. Among subjects there was 22,4% of people who are in AIESEC less than six months, 32,9% of members with seniority between six months and twelve months and 44,7% of people with seniority longer than twelve months. When it comes to organizational hierarchy, among subjects there was 27,1% of Team Members (lowest hierarchical level), 28,2% of Team Leaders and Coordinators, 24,7% of Executive Board members, 2,4% of Member Committee members (highest national hierarchical level) and 17,6% of AIESEC Poland alumni.

3. 1. Field of research

International student organization – AIESEC – is a non-political, independent, not-for-profit organization run by students and recent graduates of institutions of higher education. It was established after the Second World War when young people thought that understanding between other cultures is crucial to prevent similar conflicts. Organization’s members find world issues, leadership and management essential. They strive to achieve peace and humankind’s potential (AIESEC mission). AIESEC believes that “leadership is the fundamental solution and can be developed in anyone”. That is why organization gives opportunities of leadership development in practice for young people by cross-cultural exchanges (by taking part in one or by organizing it).
AIESEC operates in 122 countries, giving young people all around the world opportunity to cooperate in international environment and develop leadership. It consists of 40,000 members on the global level, situated in 2400 universities.

AIESEC national hierarchy is presented on Figure 1, from the left (highest national level) to the right (lowest level).

**Figure 1.** AIESEC hierarchy on national level
Source: own elaboration

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research shows that 84 out of 85 respondents (98,8%) believe that they have an influence on their career development process, so they have faith that with their own actions shape future career paths. While looking at respondents motivation to join student organization (see Figure 2), it is visible that the main reason to become AIESEC member is meeting new people (68,2%), for other 51,8% of respondents being only a student was not enough, 40% of respondents joined AIESEC in order to develop competences to get a better job and 23,5% of respondents claim to become AIESEC’s member to develop their CV.

Among other reasons pointed by respondents are: desire to travel, networking, need to belong to the committee.

Going further, 81 respondents (95,3%) answered yes for the question if they feel that being an AIESEC member let them develop the competences. That is, even though AIESEC Poland members did not join it in order to develop their careers, by working as its members they do so.
Figure 2: Why did you join AIESEC? What was your motivation? (max 3 answers; n = 85), Source: own elaboration
Figure 3. What competences AIESEC let you to develop by experience in AIESEC
Source: own elaboration
Figure 4. Would you recommend being an AIESEC member as a part of career development strategy? Where 1 means I would never recommend it, 5 – I would strongly recommend it
Source: own elaboration
Student organization let members to develop their competences. As it is presented on Figure 3, members who stay in organization for the short period (less than 6 months) most frequently say that AIESEC let them develop time management skills (13 respondents), decision making (13 respondents) and team working (12 respondents). Members who stay in organization for the longest period (more than 12 months) most frequently claim that AIESEC let them develop leadership skills (33 respondents), team working (33 respondents) and decision making (30 respondents). While analyzing data we can come to the conclusion that answers are almost the same regardless of seniority in organization (two out of three pointed skills are the same: team working and decision making). People with shorter seniority pointed also management skills while people with longer one listed leadership skills. What’s more, in both groups number of votes for two skills were equal (in case of shorter seniority 13 respondents chose development of leadership skills and also 13 chose decision making, while in case of longer seniority 33 respondents chose leadership skill, the same number voted also for team working). It is visible that more experienced members (members for longer than 6 months) feel to more develop their leadership skills (which is the main aim of AIESEC) – 33 respondents out of 38 chose this answer - than members with less experience (active in organization for less than 6 months), nine out of nineteen respondents of this category pointed development of leadership skills.

Among explanations to given answers we can read: “one of the crucial things is that in AIESEC you learn what you’re good at/what you need to work on, and then when you get into the professional life/job market it’s just easier and you don’t waste time on doing something you don’t really want to do. Doing something you like, being sure of it and doing it well, in eyes of the potential employer puts you higher than other people who just want to follow the schemes and be normal. Normal gets people nowhere” or “Being put at the position (HR, Marketing, Business Development) that wouldn’t be available for me for the next 5-10 years, let’s me develop my practical knowledge on the subject.” These opinions show that AIESEC members do value their experience, and we can say that most respondents did not think about AIESEC as a part of their career development plan, they joined AIESEC for other reasons, they did not do it in order to get better job in the future, but by doing so they claim to see the influence of AIESEC experience on their future careers.

While analyzing usefulness of AIESEC experience as a part of career development (see Figure 4) and looking on the data, we can see that 73 respondents agree that being AIESEC member is a good part of career development strategy (48 respondents – 56,5% - strongly agree). Results show also the fact that members with longer seniority in organization (more than 6 months) would more recommend being member of AIESEC as part of career development than people with shorter seniority. Moreover, it shows that members higher in the hierarchy would recommend it more strongly than people on lower positions.

After analyzing AIESEC structure, its mission, vision and shown data, we can come to conclusion that there is more than one way of developing competences as an AIESEC member:

- Being a Team Member (learning team working)
- Being a Team Leader and learning how to manage a team (focused on organizing international exchanges – sending people abroad or managing incoming exchanges)
- Getting logistics practice
- Being responsible for external relations (Executive Board member)
- Being responsible for human resources (Executive Board member)
- Being responsible for finance of local committee (Executive Board member)
- Being a headmaster of whole local committee (Executive Board president)
- Getting selling and marketing experience while working on international exchanges
- Because of connecting AIESEC responsibilities with daily life ones – getting time management skills
- Thanks to being a part of conference (national or local) organizing team getting skills such as working in fast changing environment, team working, crisis management,
- Getting photography and film making skills
- Learning about goal setting
- Getting to know how to work in stressful environment
- Gaining self-presentation skills.

Figure 5. How do you imagine your future career?
Source: own elaboration
As it is visible, there is space in AIESEC to develop skills. It is possible by working on local or national level, even on international level via working for AIESEC International.

Moreover, AIESEC’s structure is flexible, which enables members to gain new knowledge from practice experience. This answer to the research question finds confirmation in conducted research.

Respondents were asked also about their expectations of future career (see Figure 5). What is surprising, keeping in mind that respondents are part of Millennial generation, is the fact that 42 of them (49,4%) would like to have one job which enables them to take many roles instead of more frequent job changing typical for Generation Y. 32 respondents (37,6%) claim to prefer many activities connected with one particular field as their dream career path which is more frequent behavior for Millenials.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the paper is to answer the following research questions: Is student organization a space for career development? Is there a space in student organization to develop competences demanded in future professional career? What kind of competences can be developed in student organization? After analyzing collected data we can come to the conclusions that there is a space in a student organization (AIESEC) to develop competences needed in future professional career. Most of the respondents (95,3%) is convinced that being an AIESEC member let them develop their competences. Respondents underlined the possibility to develop management skills, team working and leadership skills. What is crucial, even though there is a space in AIESEC to develop skills needed in professional career, members who join organization most frequently do not take it into account (34 respondents (40% ) joined AIESEC in order to develop competences to get a better job and 20 respondents (23,5% ) claim to become AIESEC’s member to develop their CV). Having some experience in being an AIESEC member, most respondents think that being part of this organization gives them a competitive advantage on the job market (75 out of 85 respondents – 88,2%-agree with that statement). What’s more, 8 out of 15 (53, 3%) AIESEC Poland’s alumni respondents would strongly recommend being AIESEC member as a part of development of future career. It can be a prove that they found AIESEC skills useful while looking for the job. The results show that AIESEC, as an example of student organization, creates a space for future professional career development. It should be noted that student organization members realize it after some time after starting their job for this organization. Before joining it, they do not consider a fact of being an AIESEC member as part of future professional career development.

References


