AN INNOVATIVE MODEL OF TRANS-NATIONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT FOR EUROPEAN SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS
Organizational Aspects and Governance

Nunzio Casalino

Università Telematica Gugliemo Marconi, Via Plinio 44, 00193 Rome, Italy
CeRSI – LUISS Guido Carli, Via Alberoni 7, 00198 Rome, Italy

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Abstract: The purpose of the study will be to investigate the benefits of the introduction of e-learning and of a specific online environment in the training process of European civil servants. It describes the final results and the organisational impact of a first pilot training course combining 24 hours of e-learning and 27 hours (one week) of in-class courses. For each module, the e-learning preparation provided general training contents to enhance participants background necessary for in-class sessions. The project implemented a pilot to demonstrate the effectiveness of the overall system (applications, contents and organizational aspects), to promote the use of e-learning in the EU Public Administration field. After one year, the project concluded its pilot phase and the results will be analyzed. With a view to stimulating co-operation and the exchange of best practices in Europe, its purpose is to build and test an innovative model of trans-national networking, thanks to the active involvement of European schools and institutes of Public Administration.

1 INTRODUCTION

The paper investigates the benefits of the introduction of e-learning and of a specific methodology in a training process of European civil servants. It describes the final results and the organisational impact of a first pilot course combining one month of e-learning courses and one week of in-class courses. For each didactic module, the e-learning phase provided general training contents to enforce participants background necessary for in-class sessions. There are many ways of learning, specific needs and approaches. If we think of life-long training for civil servants, one of the most important points is to find a learning method which would work well. Learning is not a matter of simply adding one piece of knowledge to another. If we plot learning activities on a graph with time on one axis and achievement on the other, we will see that learning doesn't take place as a simple curve.

It is required to fully improve the ability and quality of civil servants and make them uncorrupted, self-disciplined and professional, related to governmental regulations state that civil servants at provincial and ministerial levels, department and bureau levels, county and section levels. To obtain these skills, often they should participate to training activities as schools of administration, executive leadership academies or other training organizations approved by the single human resource offices at the department and bureau level or above. An analysis of the main drivers to introduce a real change in the Public Administration (PA) context was undertaken. We looked at the political, economic, social, legal and environmental contexts of Public Administration to develop and implement an accurate training strategy. The following factors were identified to better develop the training activities:

Political factors:

- commitment to create a modern European public administration to support social and economic development;
- new relationships established between the national civil servants in the EU context;
- reform and institution building of which training and development is an important sub-component;
- absence of a civil servant wide human resource strategy and policy as a framework for training and development.

Economic factors:

- resource constraints owing to new macro economic situation;
- an expected cut of national and European funds.

Social factors:

- motivation of people for self development;
- opportunities for many civil servants to meet international best practices in Public Administration;
- implementing a real change management;
- lack of embedded management culture in Public Administrations;
- transferability of several Public Administration approaches to the other situations;
- knowledge and individual experiences exchange between civil servants;
- training currently has low status and acceptability. Sometime it is viewed as additional to day to day work.

Legal and environmental factors:

- traditions of a law based approach to Public Administration;
- primacy of the regulation to determine PA competence;
- lack of dedicated training infrastructure.

For the project has been implemented a pilot to demonstrate the effectiveness of the overall system (applications, contents and organizational aspects) and to promote the use of e-learning in the EU Public Administration field. After one year, the project concluded its pilot phase and the results analyzed. With a view to stimulating co-operation and the exchange of best practices in Europe, its purpose is to build and test an innovative model of trans-national networking, thanks to the active involvement of European schools and institutes of Public Administration and to their participation in a scientific committee of experts, established to define guidelines for the project.

2 PROJECT GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The paper introduces a training experience of the Italian SSPA (Scuola Superiore della PA) and summarizes the experiences and lessons obtained from the introduction of e-learning into the civil servants training field. The project ESCS, launched in 2007, is an initiative financed by the Italian government and aims at developing shared knowledge, key skills and competences among middle rank civil servants of National Public Administrations in order to increase and improve collaboration and civil servants' mobility within the EU Member States. It is an initiative implemented within the framework of the Agreement entitled "The promotion of coordinated initiatives to implement the Lisbon 2000 objectives for training senior civil servants from the Italian State and other European Union countries" and it followed the positive experience of the Patent Project funded by the Leonardo da Vinci programme of the European Commission and aimed at shaping a European shared framework for the training of senior civil servants in order to promote mobility and mutual understanding. The goal of the project is to develop shared knowledge, key skills and competences among middle rank civil servants of National Public Administrations in order to increase and improve collaboration and civil servants mobility within the European Union countries. The partners included some of the most important European schools and institutions such as:

- the Scuola Superiore della Pubblica Amministrazione - SSPA (Italy);
- the National Centre for IT in Public Administration - CNIPA (Italy);
- the Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne (France);
- the Ecole Nationale d'Administration - ENA (France);
- the Bundesakademie für öffentliche Verwaltung im Bundesministerium des Innern - BAköV (Germany);
- the National School of Public Administration - EKDDA (Greece);
- the Kormányzati Személyügyi Szolgáltató és Közigazgatási Képzési Központ - KSZK (Government Centre for Public Administration and Human Resource Services) (Hungary);
- the Krajowa Szkola Administracji Publicznej - KSAP (Poland);
- the National School of Government (UK).

On the basis of the "scientific curriculum of the European senior civil servant", developed by a scientific committee of experts, a pilot training programme for civil servants of EU member countries was implemented and tested. The first pilot training course held from February, 1-29 for the e-learning session and March, 3-7 for in-class training at the Reggia Palace in Caserta, with a class composed of 30 participants from the partner countries. The class was composed of senior middle-

rank civil servants from European national public administrations wishing to sign up for mobility initiatives within European Union countries. The training programme has been defined to reach the following learning outcomes:

- shared knowledge, key skills and competences to collaborate with EU colleagues;
- specific knowledge of each country. The pilot course focused on 4 countries (IT, PL, UK, F);
- each module was taught by the partner school which has developed it.

Training was delivered in English by high-level lecturers and experts from different European backgrounds. An end-of-course certificate recognised by all the partner Schools was released to the participants. According to these assumptions and trying to answer to some main research questions, with a study that intends to evidence the main problems related to technological and organizational aspects. The application of e-learning in civil servants training encountered also some difficulties.

SSPA adopted a basic e-learning platform and a blended learning method. Both e-learning and traditional classroom teaching have their respective advantages and disadvantages, and appropriate teaching mode is dependent on different training courses and training objects. The civil servant training covers both basic theoretical contents and case studies, and is suitable for a blended learning.

3 TRAINING METHODOLOGY ADOPTED

The choice to adopt a blended approach, based on in-class training and e-learning, gave extremely positive and efficient results and was highly rated by participants, who were invited to assess the quality of the training through *ex ante*, *in itinere* and *ex post* evaluation forms. The results of these evaluations provided a very useful basis to improve and implement other ESCS courses in the future. After making a careful and through research, the author determined the processes of this specific experience for civil servants, as shown in the figure.

According to the previous processes, the system consists of four subsystems: courses, teaching administration, tutoring and system management. To fulfil these objectives, we tried to design and implement a training model of teaching, transferable and repeatable in different European contexts, in order to enable PA civil servants to acquire the shared knowledge and the necessary country-

specific background to start working in a Public Administration in another EU member State. A final certificate, recognised and validated by the project partners through a memorandum of understanding, and bearing their respective logo, was delivered at the end of the course by the Italian Minister for Reform and Innovation in Public Administration.
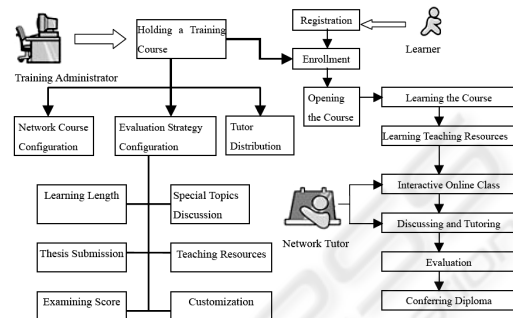

Figure 1: Process chart of the platform for civil servants.

The mixed backgrounds and nationalities of the audience and the lecturers is an important asset. The e-learning part was delivered through a platform, created with the collaboration of CNIPA, the Italian Centre for ICT in Public Administration, and accessible through the SSPA website (platform address: http://www.sspa.it/escs/).
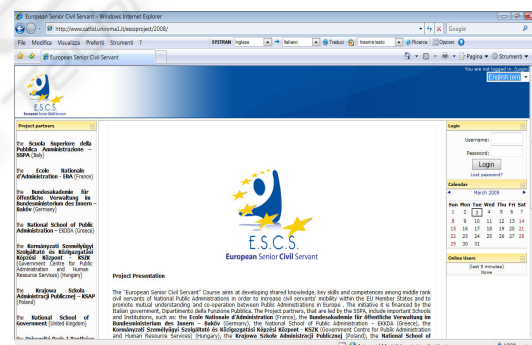

Figure 2: The e-learning platform for civil servants.

The open-source platform created by CNIPA for this purpose was based on the Learning Management System named "Moodle". With only a few modifications, this system became even more functional and adapted to the participants' needs.

The e-learning contents included mainly text material. Before the beginning of the course, the tutor sent to each participant an e-mail containing the access ID and password as well as all the necessary instructions for accessing the platform. Users accounts were created by the platform administrator for participants, lecturers, staff and tutors. The language chosen for communications

between participants, lecturers and tutors was English. The tutor followed progress made by each participant in the e-learning course and maintained direct and regular contacts with them by e-mail. A pre-assessment quiz, an intermediate questionnaire and a final test were prepared in order to assess participants knowledge before, during and after the e-learning. The tests were performed on-line by the participants. Regular contacts between the tutor and the users were kept in order to exchange information related to the overall implementation of the pilot course, to the individual access to the platform by each participant and to the tuning of the e-learning contents and platform. Moreover, a forum was created for each module in order to enable participants to interact with the tutor and the teaching staff on specific contents. The platform included also three additional forum: a forum café, a technical forum and a news forum in which was possible to publish useful information. The contents of the platform were interactive, with full tutorial assistance available for users, who had the possibility to interact via a "forum café" and a "technical forum". As far as the functionality of the platform is concerned, interaction modalities proved to be quite efficient and immediate and the quick and simple description of the resources provided through a video tutorial was quite useful. From the evaluation questionnaires, it emerged that the e-learning contents, were rated, as a whole, as efficient, exhaustive, relevant and tuned with the in-class contents. Following the blended learning approach, the in-class part of the course aimed at providing a more in-depth insight of the topics tackled in the e-learning part. A third level included country specific parts. For these sessions, participants were divided into 3 groups in different classrooms. In-class training was organised into 6-hours teaching days. Participants were asked to fill-in evaluation questionnaires at the end of each training day and at the end of the course in order to receive an exhaustive feedback on the overall course organisation and the knowledge acquired.

4 PROJECT IMPROVEMENTS

As shown by the overall active participation during the implementation of the course, the selection procedure proved to be valid and it would be advisable to adopt the same methods for future.

Possible improvements in this respect may include for instance a more complete information on the course and selection procedures (indicating clearly the selection criteria) through the SSPA website. Moreover, we want to examine the possibility to adopt the same procedure used by SSPA. It was possible to identify some suggestions for improving the learning methods such as:

- the e-learning contents could be completed with other material based on different media (software or links to relevant websites presenting statistics or economic data of interest, slides or data to be examined during the in-class sessions, videos presenting in-depth analysis or practical cases) available in streaming or download mode. The resources needed in this respect are quite reasonable for very good results in terms of quality, processing and connection times;
- a better way to contact the tutor for a more immediate interaction (in the current version, the tutor can be contacted only by e-mail);
- extension of the e-learning course length to two months. Many participants claimed in their evaluation questionnaires to have faced difficulties to follow thoroughly and carefully the e-learning modules;
- introduction of more immediate communication tools in order to establish a direct line between tutor, participants, staff and lecturers (chat, wiki, etc.) and obtain a major involvement (full immersion);
- introduction of a scheduling function or "to do list" in order to provide information related to training activities or deepening;
- improvement of the monitoring and reporting features (progress report) in order to provide participants with a detailed list of topics/lessons and the scores obtained in tests and exercises;
- elimination of the automatic transfer of messages from the technical forum to the whole list of platform users (spam effect).
- daily in-class training could be re-organised laying greater stress on morning activities in order to leave more time in the afternoon for study and social activities;
- splitting the group of participants not country-specific sub-groups left a sense of incompleteness to some participants, who expressed the need to have a final plenary session for the general review of the topics dealt with. Many participants were in fact interested in gaining an insight of all three countries.

Participants appreciated the practical approach adopted as well as the use of case studies, exercises,

role playing and team working activities. We tried to find a correct mix of PA objectives, information systems and organizational aspects to find an accepted methodology for these courses.

5 COURSE STRUCTURE AND LEARNING EVALUATION

The main modules adopted for the online and in-class training activities are:

European Integration and EU institutions:

- The historical origins of the EU;
- EU policy areas and EU enlargement;
- EU legal framework;
- EU decision making procedures;
- EU effective networking and lobbying.

EU Legal Framework and Country-specific:

- Political institution and legal framework;
- Public administration and coordination;
- Political role and legislative process;
- Coordination with EU laws;
- Public administration: legal power and civil service legal status;
- Policy making decision and implementation;
- Civil servant role in the process of implementation;
- Explanation of professional skills for government.

Managerial tools and behaviour:

- Change management;
- Motivating and coaching people;
- Cross-cultural and diversity management.
  Ethics:
- Introduction to ethical reasoning;
- Typical cases of ethical conflict in PA;
  Statistics:
- How to read a statistical document;
- How to perform statistical comparisons;
- How to perform statistical analyses.

Economics – general training:

- Principles of EU economic policy;
- European monetary integration;
- Current issues of economic policy in the EU;
- Competition policies in the EU and its member States;
- The Lisbon process;
- Countries economic outlook;
- Key institutions;
- Institutions and regulatory framework;
- Policy issues.

The evaluation was made after the e-learning modules, during and after the in-class modules. Participants were asked to indicate how far they agree or disagree with the following statements:

- if they learned new ideas or skills (or both) by attending the blended course;
- if they learned something that they can definitely use in their day-to-day work;
- if they learned something new from talking to other colleagues;
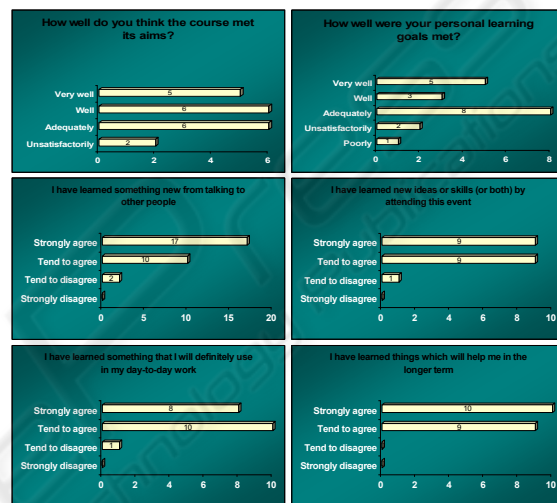- if they learned things which can help they in the long term.

Figure 3: Some screenshot of the questionnaire results.

Participants were asked also to rate the training course modules in their features:

- relevance of the topic covered;
- in-depth analysis of the topic;
- effectiveness of the presentations;
- efficiency and relevance of didactical tools;
- balance between theory and practice;
- involvement in the didactical activity;
- training materials/handouts used;
- interaction with other course participants.

After the pre-assessment phase, the learning results has been very enthusiastic and the rate of the attendants was very high:

- pre-assessment quiz average: 50,14%;
- on-line learning modules attendance: 78,45%;
- final test average: 87,26%;
- forum usage average: 49,13%
- participants interaction: 34,56%

The main aspects emerging from daily evaluation forms were the positive rating of the topics and the added value of the modules. The final questionnaire aimed at evaluating the overall satisfaction, the

attainment of the course objectives and of personal training goals. As a whole, participants gave a general positive feedback. Other questions more strictly related to the course organisation and the services provided (course administration, venue, catering and accommodation), were also included. These aspects were rated positively by participants.
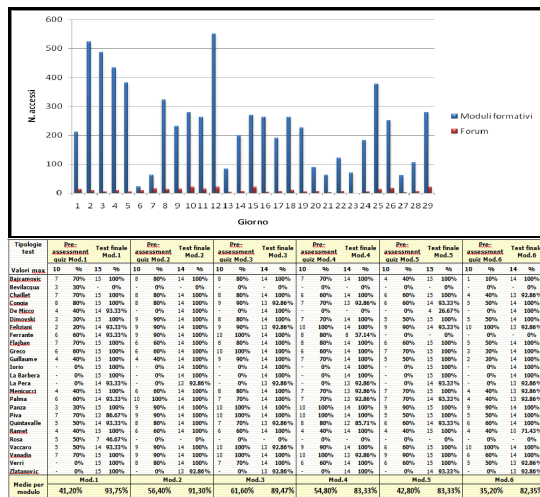

Figure 4: Some screenshot of the evaluation results.

Tipologie test	Pre-assessment quiz Mod.1		Test finale Mod.1		Pre-assessment quiz Mod.2		Test finale Mod.2		Pre-assessment quiz Mod.3		Test finale Mod.3		Pre-assessment quiz Mod.4		Test finale Mod.4		Pre-assessment quiz Mod.5		Test finale Mod.5		Pre-assessment quiz Mod.6		Test finale Mod.6	
Medie per modulo	41,20%	93,75%	56,40%	91,30%	61,60%	89,47%	54,80%	83,33%	42,80%	83,33%	35,20%	82,35%										

6 CONCLUSIONS

It is generally accepted that, in order to compete in today's complex and rapidly changing world, civil servants will need continuous access to learning resources throughout their entire working lives. Increased competition and financial limitations make a pressure for flexible learning to become an essential ingredient of educational policy. The purpose of the project is to develop shared knowledge, to update know-how, to improve skills and competences among middle rank civil servants of EU Public Administrations in order to increase collaboration and mobility within the European Union countries. Flexible learning methods, usually, give more attention to the learning process, the ability to learn, the need to learn rather than the acquisition of knowledge itself. Therefore, they need of active learners to solve problems, analyse information, and take decisions. One of the solutions is to provide to civil servants blended learning courses and self-teaching packages to acquire more competencies and experiences.

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