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PERSPECTIVE OPPORTUNITIES ON LABOR MARKET SUPPLY: A COLLATERAL IMPLICATION OF THE INNOVENTER PROJECT

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Abstract: *The paper presents the results of a survey done during the implementation of INNOVENTER – an international project, funded by EU (full title "Innovative vocational social entrepreneurship training"). The research is conducted among high school students from 16 schools in Rousse, Razgrad and Silistra. On the basis of the results obtained, the paper identifies a perspective niche in near future labor market supply.*

Keywords: INNOVENTER, Social Intrapreneur, Labour Market Supply, Attitude

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, among the major challenges for Bulgarian organizations, directly threatening not only their development, but the very survival as business entities is the increasing tendency of a lower supply of skilled labor in the labor market. In an effort to secure staffing for their businesses, employers initially resort to well-known tactics - increasing remuneration (according to their modest capabilities), shortening working hours, and overall reducing staffing requirements. Unfortunately, there are few cases where these measures lead to the expected positive results. Instead of improving their internal environment, companies face increased costs, reduced sales, and worse work discipline. Sluggish government institutions, as well as outdated regulations, further escalate negative expectations about the dynamics of the labor market. Therefore, there is no surprise that finding perspective opportunities and implementing innovative approaches to attracting and retaining staff has become a business priority.

Current paper's goal is to propose and justify such opportunities. The assumption is that people are more motivated to work when they are in a position to take action for the benefit of their community. Some studies suggest that 51% of employees want to contribute to building a sustainable society (Heldrich, J., Zukin, C. & Szeltner, M., 2012), and 65% would consider leaving the company if it harms the environment (Epstein-Reves, J., 2010). Companies applying principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) seem appropriate for career development of such people. However in recent years it has become increasingly clear that few of these organizations are actually doing anything right (Heath, R. & Waymer, D., 2017). There are reasonable doubts that corporations use CSR as a form of partial compensation for the negative effect of their activities on planetary resources and humans (Kotchen, M. & Moon, J., 2012). At the same time, the concept of social entrepreneurship is gaining popularity (Abu-Saifan, S., 2012). There are two questions we will try to answer in this paper: Do people see an alternative to their vocational development in the field of social entrepreneurship and how their attitudes relate to the problem of attracting job applicants and retaining them subsequently as employees?

EXPOSITION

It must be acknowledged that this problem is not new to the business. Never in our recent history, though, has it stood so sharply. In an attempt to save their businesses, employers are forced to hire under-qualified staff with the intention to cover the shortfall through on-the-job training. Such

ad hoc actions do not have the potential to resolve the problem in the long term. Quite reasonably, achieving a lasting effect requires a strategic approach to the situation.

An opportunity for a better strategic look gives us a survey done during the implementation of the activities of an international project, named "Innovative vocational social entrepreneurial training" (INNOVENTER). The project itself is also noteworthy for its scope and impact on the way of thinking of significant number of young people who are about to enter the labor market in the coming years.

The project involves organizations from five different countries - Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, North Macedonia and Albania. Each of the project partners (seven in total) conducts social entrepreneurship training with high school students from three different settlements. As the only academic institution among the partner organizations, the University of Ruse develops the training materials in accordance with the European Qualifications Framework - Level 5. All topics have been uploaded to a specially designed digital platform (<https://innoventer.eu>).

In fact, as Pavlov (2018) correctly points out, INNOVENTER is much more than a traditional educational platform. In addition to developing young people's knowledge and skills related to social entrepreneurship, the project aims at improving synergies between educational institutions and businesses, transferring good practices and know-how, extending teaching tools, encouraging initiative among beneficiaries and creating of transnational networks between them. In addition to pursuing these goals, a number of collateral positive effects have been achieved. One of them is the opportunity to conduct the survey presented in this paper.

The objective of the survey is to test the attitudes towards social entrepreneurship among young people. A broader concept of "social entrepreneur" has been accepted, according to which this term is not limited to employers and business owners whose "business models offer creative solutions to complex and lasting social problems" (Zahra, S., Gedajlovic, E., Neubaum, D. & Shulman, J., 2009). According to the broader concept employees could play the role of social innoventers, too. Social intrapreneurs are "people in large companies who take a direct initiative to innovate in response to social or environmental challenges while creating commercial value for the company" (Grayson, D., McLaren, M. & Spitzeck, H. 2014) or more generally who "apply the principles of social entrepreneurship in a larger organization" (SustainAbility, 2008).

The survey was conducted in three Bulgarian districts: Ruse, Razgrad and Silistra. A hundred and eighty three high school students aged 16 to 18 (68 from Ruse, 56 from Razgrad and 59 from Silistra) from 16 schools took part in it: 71% girls (N = 130) and 29% boys (N = 53).

At the beginning of the training, the participants answered two closed questions, each with three answer possibilities ("Yes", "No", "Can't decide"):

- Can you describe yourself as "proactive"?
- Is it important to you that your future work offers opportunities to help the community in which you live?

During the process of preparing survey questions and answers, the age of the respondents was taken into account as well as the limited response time they have. For these reasons, the number of questions was limited to two, the answers to three, and less familiar terms such as "innovator" and "social entrepreneur" were avoided. Instead, simpler, yet closely related words were used ("proactive" and "helping the community"). The questions are aimed at identifying certain key values for the formation of an individual attitude to social entrepreneurship – proactiveness that underlies every innovation and the desire to be useful to more people, which is a key motive in the activities of the typical social entrepreneur (if such type exists at all).

88.5% of the respondents (N = 162), 86% of the girls (N = 112) and 94% of the boys (N = 50) identify themselves as proactive. 5% of high school students (eight girls and one boy) do not identify as proactive, and 6.5% (10 girls and 2 boys) cannot decide (Fig. 1). Such a predominance of proactiveness is not surprising and could be expected – most of the trainees in the INNOVENTER project were energetic young people, who decided to participate in social entrepreneurship training voluntarily.

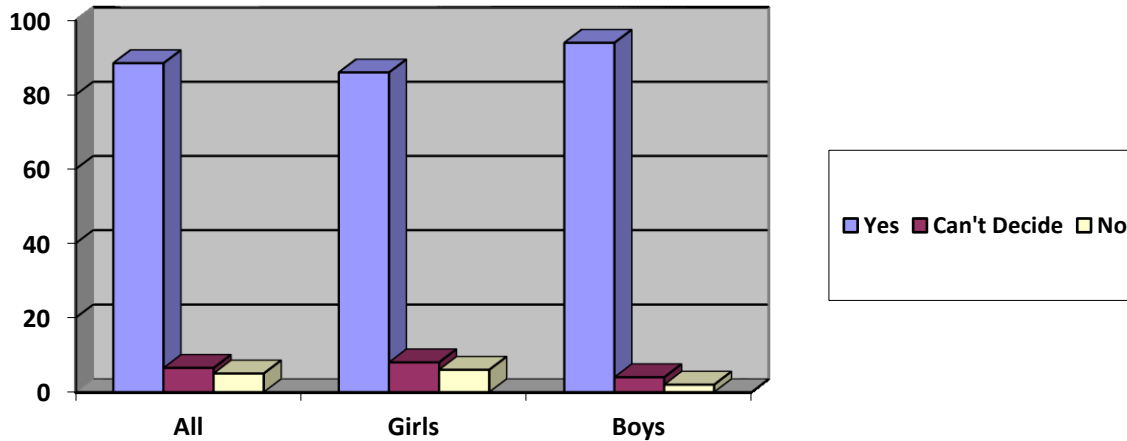


Figure 1. Can you describe yourself as “proactive”?

It is clear from the answers to the second question that for 94% of the respondents (N = 172) it is important that their future work offers opportunities to help the community in which they live. Only 2.7% (N = 5) categorically deny that it is important to them, and 3.3% (N = 6) express hesitation. As with the previous question, the variations in girls’ and boys’ responses are insignificant. It is interesting to note, however, that five girls (and no boys) gave a definitive negative answer (Fig. 2).

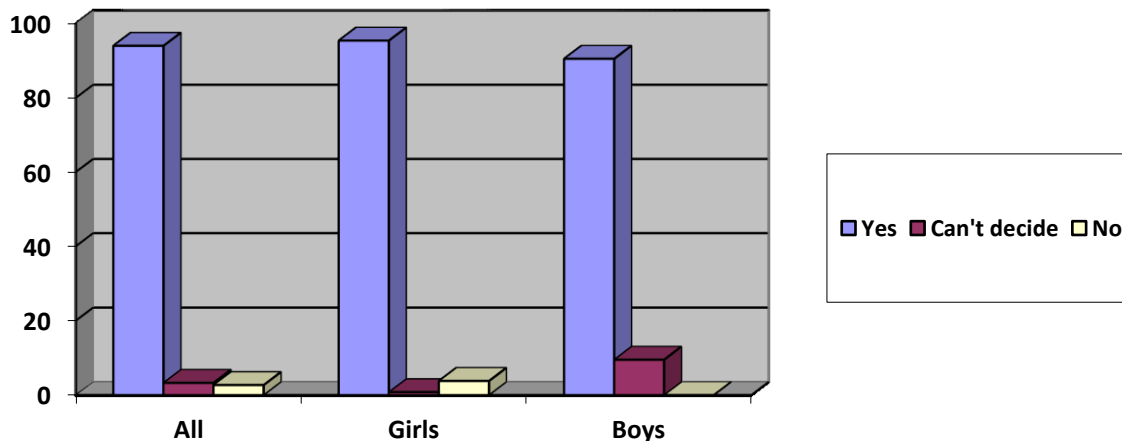


Figure 2. Is it important to you that your future work offers opportunities to help the community in which you live?

The correct interpretation of the results obtained must take account of the fact that the sample examined is not representative. However, the dominance of the affirmative answer to both questions is so peremptory that it cannot be ignored. Provided that more in-depth research on the topic is needed, the results of the study justify the formulation of two logical conclusions:

- In the coming years, a significant number of young people, who identify themselves as initiative, are expected to enter the labor market. Although self-identification does not guarantee real possession of certain qualities, it does provide information about the value constituents the individual strives for. With proper targeting and channeling of youth energy, this value trait can become an unexpected potential resource for employers.
- For a significant number of young people, it is important for their work to be of benefit to the community (this partly explains the increased interest in recent years of applicant

students in the humanitarian sciences). It is logical to assume that their career orientation will be influenced by this value.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above formulations, we can assume that a significant number of young people in our country have a commitment to social entrepreneurship. At the same time, it is not a secret that many do not have the resources to start their own businesses in the field of social entrepreneurship. The confrontation with reality forces young people to turn to other alternatives - for example, social intrapreneurship.

Of course, according to the postulates of The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, I., 1991; Krueger, N., Reilly, M. & Carsrud, A., 2000), besides a certain attitude, the formation of a specific individual intention requires appropriate subjective social norms and sufficiently high expectations for its realization. There is therefore no guarantee that the young people's attitude to social entre/intrapreneurship will lead to a real career in this field. However, what we can say for sure is that in a favorable environment, a significant number of young people would be attracted to the alternative to participate as employees in solving social problems.

This alternative should not be overstated. Not every employer can offer their employees a job that includes social or environmental activities. But even if there is such an opportunity, the applicant for a social intrapreneur must meet certain selection criteria (knowledge, skills, competences, experience, etc.). Most young people entering the labor market do not meet these criteria. In order to attract such people and subsequently retain them, the company must offer adequate training and development prospects. The incubation period can be used to its fullest extent to integrate new employees into the organization and generate up-to-date ideas for business development through social impact. It is a question of management's judgment whether these ideas will be implemented in parallel with the core business of the company, or the responsibility for their implementation will rest with a separately institutionalized venture unit.

Areas that fall within the focus of ideas for social intrapreneurship are:

- Health care: healthy eating, fitness, yoga, etc. ;
- Education and culture;
- Support for people with disabilities;
- Ecology;
- Other activities in support of the poor and disadvantaged: legal protection, public kitchens, mutual funds, etc.

Despite the many conventions and constraints, social intrapreneurship is emerging as one of the niches in the labor market that larger companies can benefit from. In this way, the business will meet the expectations of the people and part of the problems related to attracting and retaining employees will find their solution.

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