

# **SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL VULNERABILITY OF ADULTS IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY**

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## *Abstract*

The paper we propose represents the results of an inquiry based on a questionnaire. The imperative from which we started this investigation was to find adequate ways to respond dynamically to the forming needs of adults on their way of social and spiritual findings. Reality is proving that most people are not contemporary with their time as the traditionally possessed system of knowledge is far behind the level of current knowledge. Social, economic and technological advances – on the work market and in social life – create expectations of higher and more sophisticated abilities and knowledge. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to achieve two major objectives: the identification of the problems which the adult population is confronting; the evaluation of educational, social and cultural needs and expectations of this category. Knowing that this matter is very important as possible educational intervention, no matter from what level, must not start from general premises, but from a realistic analysis of certain states. If not, any initiative or action is doomed to failure or the effects are extremely harmful.

*Keywords:* adult, education, professional satisfaction, competence

## **Motivation of the Paper**

We live in a world in which transformations on all planes of society and economic and social advances have a great influence on the work force. More and more, the need for analytical thinking in the solution of complex problems, aptitudes in foresight and planning, creativity and flexibility are becoming more obvious. Technological aptitudes (especially in the field of IT), the careful structuring of free time and the quick and efficient processing of information are becoming more and more burdensome. Despite this, reality demonstrates that the majority of people are behind the times. Their level of knowledge is far behind the current level achieved by science. In a changing society, continuing education is a primary course of action for social development and particularly innovation. [European Committee, 2006, p.16] The education of adults should develop simultaneously with the burst in knowledge, with the necessity of an active and clear partaking in the development of society. Unfortunately, in our country, the interest for continuing education and the rate of participation of adults at such programs is low. The activity report of the Ministry of Education, Research and Youth (currently the Ministry of Education,

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Research and Innovation) in 2007 reveals that the value registered by the indicator regarding *the participation of adults between the ages 25-64 at continuing education and professional formation* (an indicator used in the calculation of the score of innovation) is of only 1.6% in 2005, in comparison to the EU average rate of 11%. [Mery, 2007] This trend persisted in the following years, thus the perspective of facilitating factors regarding innovation in the current Romanian context remain modest. This explains the fact that the Innovation Scoreboard of 2008 places Romania in the group of catching up countries, the last of the four groups of countries with a score below the average of other member states and the last country of the group. (with an average of 0,18 compared to 0,45, that of the EU). To better understand the context, the first group, that of the 'Innovation Leaders' is composed of Denmark, Finland, Germany, Israel, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK and the USA. The second group, that of the 'Innovation Followers' includes Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg and Holland. The third group, the 'Moderate Innovators', includes Australia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Italy, Norway, Slovenia and Spain. In the fourth group, besides Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Portugal and Slovakia can be found. [Stoica, 2009, p.127]

Continuing professional formation must become a priority in our country as well, due to the fact that through education can one's perspectives broaden to new realities and possibilities of life and strengthen the desire for bettering, thus enriching many aspects of one's life. All in all, the most important and profitable long-term investment lies within the human being. Before coming with suggestions for such a course of action, we tried to decipher the attitude of the adult towards education, how well the adult measures himself up to the problems he's facing, how fulfilled he is professionally and how involved he is socially and from a Community standpoint. The imperative from which we started this investigation was to find adequate ways to respond dynamically to the forming needs of adults on their way of social and spiritual findings, ways which stem from the understanding of 'the adult' as a whole and of his problems, interests, needs and social, professional and spiritual expectations.

### **The Objectives of Research**

This study aims to identify the problems confronted by adults and their attitude towards these problems, as well as their educational, social and cultural expectations. Possible educational intervention, no matter from what level, must not start from general premises, but from a realistic analysis of certain states, otherwise it might be doomed to failure.

## **Methodology of Research**

The method used in our study was that of an inquiry based on a questionnaire handed to adults in Mures County. A pre-inquiry with the goal of pre-testing and validating the instrument of work was used in the making of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was composed of 5 major chapters:

1. Social Problems Confronted by Adults. Their Attitude Towards These Problems and Their Responsibility
2. Professional Fulfillment and Competence
3. Educational Needs
4. Access to Information
5. The Use of Spare Time

### **Determining of the reference population and the establishing of the cross section**

Within the reference group, three major age groups have been distinguished (adults between the ages 18-25; 25-45 and over 45 years of age) with the premise that educational preoccupations of each category of age are somewhat different due to biological, psychological and social factors, as well as acquired professional statuses. In case of the first age category, a greater interest in formal education is to be expected due to the fact that the young adult is open to professionally formative activities. The young adult is well within the process of integration into the work market. Within the second category, the emphasis of interest shifts to informal education since, by the age that defines the category, the subjects are supposed to have graduated some form of education and the interest for a prosperous family life and the defining of moral and educational values within it accentuates. In the third category, interest is focused mainly on informal education, the productive use of spare time and the psychological need of maintaining one's sense of self-worth.

The cross section was comprised of 328 subjects, calculated by a probabilistic procedure, taking into account the following characteristics: age, gender, level of education (high, average, low)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the current study we did not proceed with the differentiation of the cross section by the criterion of provenance – rural and urban – due to the fact that the issues highlighted by the study are of great generality. We have carried out a careful analysis of the formational needs of adults from a rural background within a research published in *Institutiile rurale de educatie* (2005), Cluj-Napoca, Risoprint.

## Results and Interpretations

1. Social Problems Confronted by Adults, Their Attitude Towards these Problems and Their Responsibility.

In the first phase, the aim was to identify the attitude of the subjects towards the problems they confront and the ways through which they can be solved. Thus, the table of responses is as follows:

*Table 1. The attitude of the subjects towards the problems they confront*

<b>Responses</b>	<b>Totally agree</b>	<b>Partially agree</b>	<b>Partially disagree</b>	<b>Totally disagree</b>	<b>I do not know</b>
Almost all problems can be solved.	64%	36%	0	0	0
Most of the times I need help in solving my problems.	13%	47%	31%	9%	0
There is always somebody to help me with my problems.	16%	44%	20%	16%	4%
Most of the times I do not know who to turn to with solving my problems.	4%	22%	31%	42%	1%
I am solely responsible for my future.	60%	33%	3%	2%	2%

It can be observed that the vast majority of the subjects totally agree with the first and last options for a response included in the questionnaire ('Almost all problems can be solved.' And 'I am solely responsible for my future.'). The third option has received mixed responses. The fact that a large percentage of subjects feel the need to ask for assistance in solving their problems or that there is always somebody they can rely on explains the importance of inter-human relations for the subjects as an essential condition of the success in solving critical aspects of their lives but also for the failure of self-responsibility. This demonstrates the fact that the transition from a traditional to a modern society kept its related bonds. There are numerous cases in which a loved one or a family member can be asked to look for a workplace, to solve an economic problem or even do a favor free of charge.

The goal of stating three major problems that the subjects face is to produce a classification of immediate necessities and to analyze the existing needs of the age categories. Thus, the problems considered major by the subjects are represented in the following diagram:

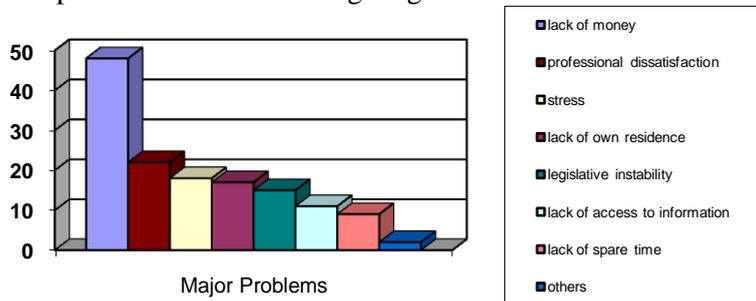


Figure 1. *Major issues of the subjects*

Although the responses were diverse, they can be integrated both into Maslow's pyramid of needs and Vroom's expectancy theory. Some subjects offered responses referring to problems of external origin, uncontained by their desire of fulfillment or individual daily issues. The subject's responses are of general character, envisaging society as a whole, or even global: the economic and health crisis, educational issues etc.

By referring to each age group, some differences can be pinpointed within the responses regarding specific issues faced by category. Furthermore, the responses vary at a greater degree as the age of the subjects decreases, probably due to the fact that the young are more susceptible to facing setbacks and due to their lack of experience, unlike the subjects of older age whose aspirations are well defined.

The lack of money is a general issue highlighted by all age groups: both the employed – in any field – and those still under the financial support of their families face the same shortcoming. External issues have a greater impact on the lives of young people due to the fact that they have not yet been faced by the situation of financially supporting another person (in many cases, not even themselves), their primary concern being the finding of a job that can bring satisfaction. Unlike the other age groups, the young identified 'practical training' as an issue.

The issues of the second age group are based on the self. Physiological and security needs, social needs, the lack of money and residence, professional dissatisfaction and insecurity are highly placed in the category of major issues that this age group faces. Awareness of the fact that professional success requires quality professional training becomes an actuality and the fact that the aforementioned training can bring a certain level of independence both professionally and in decision making.

The responses of the age group of subjects over 45 years of age generally reflect insecurities probably caused by insufficient adaptation to the

competition regime and the market economy. The majority of subjects consider that their workplace has lost importance, the impact of stress has grown which in turn affects their health and performance and that they are being disregarded by their younger colleagues.

The level of professional training and preparation has not been pinpointed as an issue by the cross section. The questions asked within the further items aim to reveal the motives.

## 2. Professional fulfillment and competence

Beginning the series of questions regarding professional fulfillment and competence, 73.3% of the subjects declared that they are satisfied with the chosen education/profession, only 8.8% are dissatisfied and the remaining 17.7% remain undecided.

By correlating these figures with previous data that revealed the professional dissatisfaction of the subjects, a question arises: if both professional dissatisfaction and satisfaction have a high frequency, what lies at the basis of this apparent contradiction? A few general motives might be organizational shortcomings, the management policies regarding human resources, the legislature etc. One example can be the story of a social worker, who, upon employment, considered the job to be a great opportunity to put his knowledge into practice, but instead of counseling, fieldwork and the analysis of concrete situations, the force of certain laws restricted the liberty of carrying out his duties.

This explains the fact all subjects questioned consider their professional preparedness to be at least average, 11% rating their professional competence with the maximal amount of points.

In order to partially decipher the aforementioned contradiction, the subjects have been asked to give examples of barriers that interfered with the process of fulfilling their duties. Among the responses received, only one can be considered of external origin, independent of the subject's person, that of inequality of chances. It is interesting that over a third of the subjects of the inquiry consider themselves to be discriminated professionally, although a high percentage of subjects do not possess computer skills, nor do they speak a foreign language. These outcomes have a vastly negative effect, taking into account the impact of the computer in the work market of today and the knowledge of a foreign language in a world that aspires towards opening the cultural barriers between nations and the broadening of professional cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Computer and foreign communication skills are new general and basic aptitudes that represent criteria of the evaluation of literacy of the population. Their importance is also underlined in the Explanatory Memorandum on the Treaty of Lisbon on lifelong learning.

Probably the aforementioned barriers coupled with professional dissatisfaction through the lack of money lied at the root of at least a theoretical search for possibilities of professional reintegration for 43% of the subjects.

### 3. Educational needs

By considering the formative interests expressed by the adults in the questionnaire, the institutes of continuing education would truly become functional. By referring to the educational requests expressed by adults, main aspirations and areas of interest can be distinguished. By analyzing the data obtained, computer science and foreign languages retain the first two positions, which leads to the fact that adults feel the need to learn and develop the aforementioned general and basic aptitudes. On the other hand, many opinions stressed the enrichment of professional and general knowledge.

The motivation of the subjects in enriching of their knowledge in the fields above are extremely diverse and interesting. The fact that more than half of the inquired cross section considered choosing improvement in a certain field as important for their general knowledge can be largely attributed to the Romanian educational system that had existed for a long and time had emphasized the creation of a solid base of general knowledge instead of professional training. In addition, approximately one third of the responses include profession as motivation, meaning the workplace and professional reorientation. Thus, a previous observation is validated, according to which only 40% of the subjects considered the possibility of reorientation.

Although the subjects might actually face the need for professional reorientation, many of the inquired possess no knowledge of the mechanism of such a process. Upon being asked 'Where would you turn for professional reorientation or development?', the majority of subjects replied indicating AJOFM ( the County Agency for the Occupation of Workforce). This might indicate an actual desire for requalification and knowledge about the organizing of requalification courses. However, a very small percentage of subjects would turn to other organizations due to the questionable nature of the certificates or diplomas issued by them. This constitutes a problem for the Romanian work market, due to the fact that before employment, an officially recognized diploma is requested, many times in favor of personal skills and competence. Approximately 40% of the subjects consider formal education to be the main source of professional qualification (such as university or arts and crafts courses). This is an acceptable situation for people who wish professional reorientation, but impractical and useless for those who wish to further develop their professional skills previously acquired. The fact that only the forms and institutions above have been mentioned might indicate the fact that adults do not know the full array of

opportunities for continuing education for adults available on a local level. Whether the lack of access to information or the incapability of adults to inform themselves is a factor will be revealed in the following chapter.

#### 4. Access to information and the attitude towards information

This chapter of the questionnaire is relevant to the way the population perceives continuing education, further development and learning as an adult. Approximately 40% of the subjects are informed through written and audio-visual media. Radio and TV stations have an ever-expanding audience and play a major impact on day-to-day life and they have become the main source of information. This is particularly true to adults over 45 years of age, probably due to the lack of interest in other forms of media or spending of spare time, not knowing other possibilities or even convenience. Very few that belong to this age group use the Internet as a source of information and this might even be a cause why 46% of the subjects failed in different situations due to lack of information.

The reasons why almost half of the subjects are unable to access information are relevant: 37.5% do not know how to use certain sources of information, 30% do not know where to find useful information, 10.5% due to the lack of spare time and probably a fairly large percentage due to lack of interest. In other words, over two thirds of subjects that were unable to find necessary information either do not know how to find information or use sources of information. Paradoxically, although many subjects consider themselves to be highly qualified and the number of subjects displeased with the methods by which information can be accessed is high, for many people these obstacles actually are themselves.

#### 5. The use of spare time

Choosing possibilities by which spare time can be spent leaves much to be desired among the adult population. Television is not only the main source of information, but it has also become the favorite pastime in every household. To many, television cannot be replaced by cinema, theater and sports. Our research reveals that, sadly, adult interest for reading, sports, theatre etc. is extremely low.

Adult preoccupation in informal and social activities unrelated to their work is insignificant. This might be the result of the poor development of the non-governmental sector and the lack of activities that serve a well-defined scope, complementing the profession of choice. Unlike in our country, where the community is not of interest for the common man who rather takes part in groups for entertainment purposes, in well-developed countries there are significant activities for adults that benefit the community.

## Conclusions

In summary, the majority of adults who filled out the questionnaire have high expectations, but their efforts to fulfill them are minimal. The fear of tomorrow, the race for additional revenue, daily stress, dissatisfaction due to the quality of life, the lack of basic attributes requested by modern society, the inability to adapt to certain social and professional contexts and high vulnerability are the main issues of adults. We believe that at the root of these problems lies the insufficient development and furtherance of educational programs for those who can better perform socially and professionally and for those who have the potential of becoming an efficient workforce but need qualified guidance.

In conclusion, we consider that the current crisis of the Romanian society cannot be solved by solely implementing economic and administrative reforms. Cultural and educational measures must also be adopted. It is well established that, in modern societies, education and continuing formation are fundamental fields in reducing poverty and for social development. [Stoica, 2006, p. 242] Education must become a primary concern in our country as well, an education appropriate to the adult's actual needs, one that stimulates activity and creates awareness of its own value.

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