

CASE STUDY

Mission Locale-ML (see footnote 1)

Facilitating access
to learning programmes
and the labour market

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Abstract

This case study was conceived as a tool to understand the reality of a Mission Locale¹ (ML) advisor's job; it is a learning and educational support for all types of careers advisors and counselling professionals mainly working with young people at risk of social exclusion with no or poor educational and professional background. The case study provides background information about the support and guidance system in France for young people (under 25) in all fields: socio- professional, educational, health-related ... often in a situation of high precariousness.

It also offers an interesting basis for discussion for the professionals of careers guidance and social support. What are the benefits and limits of guidance in a ML? How equipped are the advisors to deal with young people with low levels of qualification at risk of social exclusion? What are the relevant fields of intervention for an advisor? Should advisors work in partnership with other structures (medical, social, educational ...)? What solutions do they have in the case of failure of their support? The two stories depict the daily work of an advisor at the ML and present two different outcomes. The first is successful, while the second does not lead to the desired outcome but rather to a questioning of the professional choice.

¹ Mission locale (ML) is a social institution that helps young people (age 16–25 years old) plan their career: search of employment and training; support in healthcare, housing, financial-social-personal issues, daily life. Young people coming for support are mainly with fewer opportunities. The ML regroups many guidance programs. Regarding the situation of the young people and their priorities, some of them are part of specific support programmes and come for appointments very regularly, others come from time to time with specific questions or help. Guidance practitioners working there are coming from very different backgrounds, there is no specific curriculum leading to that specific profession. Some might be psychologists, others from political sciences or from a pedagogical field, and even sometimes they have no diploma but some field experience.

Keywords

Orientation, guidance, social and professional integration, socio-professional, skills, interaction with beneficiaries, training, employment, diagnosis, needs analysis, holistic vision, process management.

Key Characters

Mehdi: is a 22 year old young man with poor language skills, who is often very rude and has very poor hygiene. He has spent time in various foster homes in Marseille, sometimes hosting by his mother when he is not kicked out of the house. He failed his "brevet" (the final exam in the 3rd year of secondary school) when he was 16 years old. That is the first time he came to ML accompanied by his teacher. The challenge was to find a new path for him outside of the school environment where he was failing. For a while, he has done nothing but smoke and hang out in the streets. Until his 21st birthday he was part of a special contract for young adults² and during this period he was followed by a social worker. Having turned 22, he is back to his mother's house and back to the ML to ask for a job, as he needs money.

Omar: is a 21 year old man who was born in Senegal. He arrived in France with his brother where their mother is living (who is a resident and has had a successful career for many years). Having been expelled from the school where he was studying for a vocational qualification to become an electrician, he is not able to finish the course. He claims that this is because of his older brother, with whom he lives (in an apartment paid by their mother,) spent his time distracting him, organizing parties until late at night and encouraging him to skip classes. Omar is very polite, very punctual and behaves (language and appearance) well.

Paolo: is a ML advisor. He follows a large number of young people (up to 300), sometimes for short periods, sometimes for longer periods, even several years. The young people come when they want whenever they feel the need, if they are not part of a specific support programme offered by the ML. They often feel that the ML has to give them a job, so they can earn money and be independent for a while. However, the guidance process is more structured (regular meetings) if the young people enters into a specific programme of support which offers help and guidance in social, financial, educational and health fields, as well as help in applying for financial aids (for accommodation, transport passes...). Paolo's first task is to get to know the young people, and to gain the confidence of the young people so that he can guide and support them more accurately. People skills and the tacit skills gained from experience working with other clients are very important in the advisor's decision making process, as in most of the cases, these skills prevail over their technical skills (to meet criteria).

² A contract that is signed between a young person and the French Welfare for Children Organization to assist a person in their everyday and educational life when he/she is separated from his/her parents. The contract is composed of financial assistance and personal guidance designed to make the young person's situation easier until the 21st birthday by helping them stay in foster family, or furnished apartment. They are continually supported by social workers.

Story #1

Paolo has known Mehdi for a long time as he first came to see him when he failed his school exam. Following the special contract he was involved in until his 22nd birthday, he is meeting Paolo because he needs a job to earn money. Mehdi is waiting for Paolo to find him a job now because he believes that is what the ML is for: to find a job for young people like him. Mehdi's reflection is the following: Paolo owes him a job as it is his task to help him earn money so he can be independent.

Paolo fears that the young man will begin on a particular professional pathway and then stop halfway through. But given Mehdi's urge to find a job, and after thinking about several options, Paolo decides to orientate Mehdi towards BTP (construction and manual work), a more practical sector where Paolo has a large professional network and where job offers for poor qualified people are quite easy to find. Nevertheless Mehdi requires some training before this opportunity is possible. Thus, Mehdi returns to school and starts his professional training but he does not finish because of a lack of motivation.

Paolo's fear (before trying the manual work option with Mehdi) came true. Mehdi is not interested in this sector, thus he is not willing to attend the course. Although Mehdi had clearly indicated that he did not really want to get involved in this programme from the start, it is essential for him to upgrade his construction and manual work skills to be able to get a job in the sector.

Back in the ML, Paolo asks Mehdi to speak about his desires and interests, so that he can get to know him better. Paolo listens carefully to what Mehdi reveals, because listening to his life story and experience, will allow him to make an assessment and guide him towards possible suitable lines of work. From this, several actions were then implemented to build Mehdi's motivation (face to face interviews, group workshops... to assess his situation).

Based on the unsuccessful attempt in BTP, the results of interviews and workshops and Paolo's own opinion (who sees Mehdi as a not yet employable young man, as he is never punctual, always impatient and unstable, coming to ML with dirty clothes, using inappropriate language...), Paolo decides to suggest that Mehdi applies to the Civic Service³ and specifically to the organisation Unis-Cité, which offers multi vision civic services with varied themes including fieldwork. Mehdi agrees to apply and he is accepted and becomes involved in a project for 6 months. After the end of the 6 months, despite numerous absences, Mehdi completes his mission. After this experience, he returns to the ML.

Mehdi's approach is to wait for something to present itself to him: "I need a job!"; "Give me a job"; "I have the right to have a job!"... He is angry with society and with the job market that doesn't accept him.

Paolo has gained Mehdi's confidence more and more. Through some other individual evaluations, Paolo tries to help Mehdi identify a career path with a medium-term vision, and not just involving joining a guidance programme that support him for a limited period, which puts him constantly in the position of restarting the process. In order to continue to build a relationship of trust with the young man, Paolo asks him again about his passions and interests. Mehdi accepts to give Paolo a deeper insight into his passions and eventually tells Paolo he loves hip-hop; he volunteered at a local radio station during his civic service and he enjoys working with youth.

From this last interview, it seemed that Mehdi wished to start a training programme to become a cultural activity leader. Paolo carries out some research to make this a reality for Mehdi and Mehdi agrees to enter a training centre to become a cultural activity leader. A further interview is planned, aimed to outline the steps required to reach this goal. Mehdi does not attend this interview but instead goes directly to the training centre in the civic service. The discussions with Paolo have boosted his capacity to take action.

³ Civic service is a voluntary commitment to serve the public interest by working in a non-profit or public sector structure between 6 and 12 months, open to anyone aged 16 to 25 without any conditions of qualifications. The missions are compensated 573 Euros per month.

However, Mehdi is not qualified enough to start the training.⁴ Mehdi returns to the ML after having been informed of this at the training centre. He is very angry, especially with Paolo, who tries again to explain the situation and necessary process to access the training centre. But Mehdi says he wants a job, he does not want to upskill. He walks out, slamming the door.

Two months pass, and Mehdi returns, this time looking for support in finding accommodation: his mother has kicked him out.

Paolo supports Mehdi in applying for a specific financial support programme to solve the housing issue. The application process is long (reasons and needs have to be very detailed) and Mehdi loses patience more than once. Anger is a part of his state of mind, as he is in a difficult situation with no house, no job, and no qualifications. Mehdi says the process to solve his problems is way too long and indicates again his wish to simply have a job and earn money, and not to engage in more training or school.

Paolo, thanks to his active links with a network of recruiters, is aware that a new shopping centre is launching a big recruitment operation. Paolo shows him a job advertisement from that company that is recruiting staff. Mehdi is invited to an interview that he does very well in. He works for two months, and everything is going well, but for administrative reasons his contract is not renewed.

His mother accepts him back at home; she accompanies him to the ML. The relationship with Paolo became much calmer.

Mehdi is convinced that he wants to work with young people. He and Paolo search for possible ways to achieve his dream. He applies for several positions such as a mediator in underprivileged areas, but he is not selected. Mehdi finds it quite easy to get to the interview stages, but then he is not selected. He thinks that "it is because of his Arab face". Paolo suggest that he works on his appearance (language, hygiene and clothes), his social skills and that he prepares better for the interviews. He gives him tips and advice on how to improve. Mehdi accepts the advice and does practice interviews with business mentors (retired Human Resources managers) to work on his presentation in front of an employer and improve his communication skills.

Paolo offers him the possibility of starting a training course while he is living with his mother. Together, they find a course to allow him to become an activity leader within one year. He has to prepare an application, explaining in particular his future professional project.

He gets accepted and follows the course assiduously until the last day. He then applied for an activity leader job and was accepted! This is an outcome after two years of support from Paolo.

⁴ According to the ML scale of educational level ranging from 1 (master's degree) to 6 (no diploma). For this particular training Mehdi is going to attend, Level 4 is necessary: graduation diploma taken at the end of high school. Whereas Mehdi has only Level 6: early drop out, leaving school at 16 or even earlier; no diploma.

Comments and topics of discussion:

Two years ago when Mehdi entered ML, Paolo's assessment was that Mehdi is unemployable. The tools he used to come to this conclusion were both technical and people / social.

Technical tools: During the multiple interviews he carried out with Mehdi, he undertook competency evaluations and an analysis of his current situation (back to 2 years ago) in the field of education and work (no diploma and no job experience).

Social and people skills: as previously said, Mehdi is a young adult who was not very punctual, who could be quite rude and impolite and very often absent without informing. He also did not have a stable housing situation. His personal hygiene was an issue and he dressed in an inappropriately for job interviews.

But Mehdi had the possibility and skills to become employable. Paolo tried to help him understand the world of work, and while acknowledging that passive discrimination may exist, he explained that better preparation is necessary to get and keep a job, including understanding and respect of the constraints and conditions.

Paolo's main task was to gain Mehdi's confidence and to get to know more about him. Building this relationship of trust helped mobilise the young man, and helped progress him down an appropriate career path. Paolo's method is to WORK WITH the young man and not to work FOR him. He wanted Mehdi to understand that he will help him, but he won't do everything for him. Mehdi had to be proactive.

Thus, Paolo's decision making process did not follow a framework but is based on his intuition as well as his tacit and social skills. The reflective approach used by Paolo is both connected to what Mehdi wants, and the need to meet basic needs when they are not met. Solving the housing issue became more important than finding a job at one point in the story.

Precariousness among youth is quite widespread in France. The ML offers workshops taking into account the problems and the precariousness encountered by the young people, while the cross-sectional theme remains the professional one. Depending on the problems encountered, the ML can offer guidance programmes or services (either internally or through partners) that best corresponds to a person's needs.

Regarding education and up skilling: for young people with low levels of education, an assessment period is necessary, during which a skills evaluation is carried out in order to assess if a validation of acquired experience (VAE) can be done (in cases where the young person has years of professional experience without having a school diploma). In France VAE is the only way to upgrade educational level based on acquired experience, but it requires at least 2 or 3 years of extensive professional experience in one specific field.

Story #2

Paolo has known Omar since 2013, when he first came to ML to be advised on vocational training. In July 2014, Omar came back to ML, one month after having been expelled from school.

During the first individual interview, they try to find different possible solutions. Omar seems motivated to return to training. They settle on a vocational course in industrial maintenance; the technical side seems to interest Omar and there is high demand for workers in this sector in the region. In addition, the training begins in October and a large well-known national company provides it.

Paolo sends a document that confirms Omar's level of education to the training centre and Omar submits his application. He is invited to the selection interview. The response is positive and he can participate in the training. They are both delighted with this positive and relatively fast outcome.

However, Omar comes back to see Paolo in February 2015. He complains that he does not understand anything in training and cannot find an internship. Paolo supports him, saying that he will help him find an internship through the small business breakfasts that ML organises in partnership with employers and HR managers of regional companies. Feeling motivated by this, Omar continues with the training. However, he fails to complete it. Omar is not passionate about industrial maintenance and his brother's bad influence is also a factor.

He returns to the ML in June 2015, saying: "I'm tired, it's hard. I want to change sectors". Paolo offers him the chance to attend a career orientation meeting organised by a partner organisation. Omar refuses. He wants a job! When questioning about passions and interests, he just says "money; I want a job to earn money and be independent". Paolo finds him a place at a college which offers training in basic skills⁵ (ETAPS) which helps trainees to acquire the skills and knowledge to be able to access vocational training. Omar eventually agrees and starts in September 2015. This training can be tailored (modules and duration) according to individual needs. According to the trainers, Omar will attend a 4-month training/internship. He finishes the programme. However, the results of the test at the end of the course were not positive: as Omar was missing classes regularly and he did not improve his skills.

Paolo is sceptical and starts doubting his guidance strategy with Omar. It seems that repetitive failures never lead to any light. Attending the ETAPS training would have given Omar the necessary level to enter any vocational training course; but the unsuccessful attempt confirms that Paolo has to dig deeper on Omar's interests.

Omar seems lost as he doesn't know what to do and what he wants. Training is not for him. Paolo searches in his professional network some clues. Following a short presentation of the construction sector by a local partner of the ML, Omar does an internship in January 2016 in this field and comes out saying that this sector is not for him.

He then tries to get a job as a maintenance worker: this is a position that there are many vacancies for and does not require a high qualification level. Omar gets several interviews, but all the employers refuse him without explanation. Paolo tries to identify the reasons for these repeated refusals by questioning Omar. From this discussion he realises that Omar does not know how to properly behave in a job interview and how to properly answer questions about skills and interests. Paolo then suggests a job interview workshop. Omar's mother comes along to the following interview with Paolo, and she tries to push him towards a career in turner-milling. Paolo is sceptical, the training is very technical which means it is also very long, and in the region there are few opportunities in this area, especially without a driving license.

Omar does not show any desire in a turner milling career and strongly expresses again his will not to attend any more training which he does not understand a lot about. The situation seems hopeless; Omar does not take any initiative and has very little autonomy. He waits for Paolo to find the solution. Omar's plans are very scattered and he seems incapable of projecting himself into the future. However, he has good social skills and he is very easy going.

⁵ The Regional Space for Access to First Knowledge has as its primary aim the acquisition of basic skills but also the acquisition of French as a second language (depending on the needs of those concerned), as well as the development of general knowledge and knowledge of the social, economic and institutional environment with a view to give access to a professional qualification, employment and lifelong learning. The target groups are 16-25-year-olds who are unskilled and unemployed; and job seekers and youth and adults who are in unstable employment. Training can be conducted either full time (35 hours per week) or part-time and opens the right to social security and remuneration of trainees for continuing vocational training.

Paolo really tries to support him, increasing his interviews with Omar and having him participating in group workshops with retired professionals, aimed at identifying and developing skills and preparing applications and job interviews. Paolo hopes to eventually be able to develop a strategy with Omar for his future. Omar maintains a defeatist attitude: "If nothing happens, it will be a disaster, but I cannot do much more". He constantly sees himself as a victim, and never puts himself into question.

Paolo is not convinced with Omar's mother's idea for his future (turner milling) and contacts a social worker to help solve his housing problem, so as to reduce the impact his brother has on Omar's ability to attend training. Paolo also arranges a psychologist to meet with Omar and work with him for a while.

Comments and topics of discussion:

Paolo presented Omar with numerous support programmes, gave him many choices and the possibility to test out different options. He activated his professional network and the ML's partners. He outlined the constraints and specific environments of different sectors. He began to wonder whether Omar had intellectual problems or if he was just pretending not to understand.

Paolo wondered about his guidance practice: was he too overprotective? Was his approach too focused on kindness? Should he have changed his attitude? Should he have had Omar's intellectual abilities assessed at first? Should he have listened to Omar's mother and send Omar on a turner milling training course? Should he have asked for a psychological test to assert Omar's capacity to understand and accumulate knowledge? What would you have recommended to Paolo?

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