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Core activities and career pathways of independent trainers-consultants in France

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Abstract

This paper presents some of the key findings from a 2013 survey achieved with a representative sample of 101 independent trainers-consultants, members of a French trade union. These results highlight more particularly their socio-demographic characteristics, their core activities and four main career pathways identified. This survey was part of a two years action research, conducted in a partnership between this professional trade union and university laboratories in the field of adult education. The aim was to improve the understanding of this specific professional group, of its on-going professionalization process and its visibility as one of the actors of the continuing education and vocational training (CVET) system in France.

Keywords: independent trainer-consultant; career-paths; professionalization; continuing education and vocational training

Introduction

Vocational education and training (VET) has gained greater importance on the European and national social and political agendas over the last years. Considering the demographic and economic challenges, the needs for a sufficient and highly qualified labour are leading to major issues concerning the teachers and the trainers. While the growing importance of lifelong learning entails changes in the form and process of learning and impact on trainers' role, their practices, their identities and their training are still under-researched, compared to the detailed knowledge developed at european level and national level for vocational teachers (Cort, Hartkönen & Volmari, 2004).

According to the investigation achieved in the research project *Professionalisation of VET teachers for the future* (PROFF), coordinated by TTnet¹ Denmark and TTnet Finland, many countries are or shall soon be seeing shortages of VET trainers.

Previous studies have shown that training of trainer provision is inconsistent (Brown, 1997). Quality and competences of trainers in continuing vocational education and training (CVET) and adult learning are considered as a condition for ensuring high quality workplace training, as one of the strategic objectives of European cooperation in CVET (Council of the European Union; European Commission, 2010). Among the diversity of CVET trainers' profiles, the independent trainers or self-employed trainers represent a professional group little known.

An analysis of continuing education and training by the DARES, shows that individual trainers (*formateurs individuels*) account in 2011 for approximately 13493 of the 58668 training providers on the French market, that is to say 23%. Several events, such as the crisis of 2008 and the current one, have since altered the environment of their activities, and led to question their place, and for some of them, their survival (Delort & Lê, 2012). Based on the observation of both weak visibility and limited recognition by institutional and economic actors, one of the two trade unions representing about 200 independent trainers-consultants in France launched a call for partnership in 2011 to conduct a research with the aim to explore the professional identity of their members and the long-term evolution of their activities.

The first part of this article starts with an insight into the continuing vocational education and training (CVET) system in France, the occupation of trainers and the trade-union movement representing independent trainers-consultants. This is then followed in the second part by the participatory action research methodology after reviewing the research question. In the third part, the survey results concerning some socio-demographic characteristics, the core activities and the career paths identified for the 101 respondents will be presented, before pointing out in the conclusion three lines of tension to consider in the on-going professionalization process of this occupational group.

Independent trainers-consultants in the French context of CVET

Lifelong learning is a national obligation according to the French policy of vocational education and training (VET). It includes initial vocational training and continuing vocational education and training (*formation professionnelle continue*). CVET is in France the area of training for the persons who have left initial education and training (*formation initiale*). It is intended for people, already part of the workforce or entering in working life, to help them remain in employment, develop skills, acquire levels of qualification, find or return to work.

They can access training in different ways, with regard to their individual status (employees, job seekers) and their age (under 26, 26-45, over 45). CVET depends on various partners, such as the state, the regions, firms and social partners. Collective bargaining plays an important role in this system to develop and implement two categories of training: training for people in work, in the private and public sectors as well as self-employed people; training for job seekers.

Already in the 1960's the development of continuing education has been considered as a priority in facilitating the transition of the traditional labour force into new industries. The French law, dated 16th July 1971, introduced the principle of the right to continuing training, with an obligation for firms to fund continuing training and

the right to training during working hours. Since then CVET has been considered an independent area of labour law. This principle of private financing of training activities created a market for continuing vocational training.

Since 2000, major reforms have been undertaken (Law of social modernisation January 2002, Law of liberties and local responsibilities August 2014, Law of Lifelong guidance and training 2009) to adapt the French CVET system facing the pressure of global economic changes. Various measures are also implemented in consultation with the public employment services, the territorial level, local authorities (regions, departments), employers, and social partners.

To anticipate skill needs, the state implements a variety of devices. Among them, the contracts prospective studies (contrats d'études prospectives) are intended to allow the state and the social partners to establish a joint diagnosis of a sector and possible actions. Regional observatories for job and training (Observatoires régionaux emploi-formation) collect data on employment and training for a prospective analysis of qualifications in each region. Since 2003 each branch has also to set up a prospective observatory for occupations and qualifications (Observatoire prospectif des métiers et des qualifications). These observatories provide prospective monitoring in the evolution of occupations at national, regional, European and international level trying to anticipate transformations, emergence and disappearance of jobs.

In recent years many initiatives were taken to introduce quality criteria for the VET system. At national level, the Outline Financial Legislation Act (LOLF) of 1 August 2001, introduced culture of results and making public action more effective. In addition, the Research, Surveys and Statistics Development Department (DARES) of the Ministry of Employment, the Evaluation, Forecasting and Performance Department (DEPP) of the Ministries of Education and of Higher Education and Research, and the Centre for qualifications Studies and Research (CEREQ) all compile statistics and conduct studies to assess the effectiveness of the policies implemented.

At regional level, the regional councils, which are now in charge of apprenticeships and vocational training for young people and adults, have adopted 'quality charters'. These documents are co-signed by vocational bodies representing particular sectors, or by training organizations that enter into contractual agreements with the region. At training provider level, a number of quality labels were introduced in France in the early 1990s, with a view to certifying the quality of training organizations and trainers.

Continuing vocational training providers (organismes de formation)

To provide CVET and use the funding devoted for it through a mix of corporate contributions and public financing, training organisations need to fulfil a formality of registration with the Government administration responsible (DIRECTE). According to key figures on continuous education and training by the DARES, there are of 58 668 training providers on the French market, with a total turnover of 13.1 billion euros, for 23.8 million people trained. Only 18 101 of these providers offer training as their main activity (Delort & Lê, 2012).

Individual trainers represent approximately 23% of the total number of providers, 3% of the total turnover and 7% of the public trained. The training providers can be distinguished in two main categories: Public and semi-public bodies; private training bodies. The first category includes three types of bodies: the establishment reporting to the Ministry of Education such as the GRETA and the National Centre for Distance Learning (CNED); bodies covered by other ministries, such as Ministry of Agriculture for agricultural training centres, bodies run by the regions, such as the National Adult Vocational Training Association (AFPA), through the final transfer of responsibility of

January 2009. Non-profit making associations, private profit-making enterprises and self-employed trainers, compose the second category of private training bodies. All of these bodies can offer and deliver training services to people in work, self-employed, job seekers and other individuals requiring continuing vocational training.

The occupation of trainers in France

Various types of trainers correspond to the various dimensions of the French VET and CVET systems. Their recruitment, training and career paths differ according to their activity. The terminology teacher versus trainer can be clarified as follows (Centre Info 2004). In initial vocational education and training, the teacher operates in the formal education system - the school (schools, colleges) and universities- regardless of the level of education. The apprenticeship master is the employee responsible for training the young apprentice in the company. CVET in its complexity represents a multiplicity of actors whose training is not always the main activity. The access to functions and training professions is much more flexible than initial training. The trainer is a professional engaged in the activities of continuing vocational training within the enterprise or outside, and generally in private training markets. More specifically, it is a pedagogue who pursues his/her activity with and for adults. Other actors are involved in the training process: consultant, training manager in a training centre or company, in-company tutor.

The status of trainers is not regulated. There is no national legislation governing the status of trainer or other actors of the training. Most trainers are working on private-law contracts. They are chosen for their qualifications, competencies and professional experiences related to a specific area. Initially, the adult education and training was intended to be different from the traditional school model, with more flexible training contents than in initial education and training that could be tailor made at the request of the 'client'. For this reason, the trainer must often design and adapt the training content according to the needs of his/her public. The trainer occupation is a relatively new one, whose emergence was favored by the law of 1971. This occupation is multiform with regard to the various statuses that it covers: full-time employees, part-time employees, individual contractors, freelance in a hosting company (portage salarial), or independent with liberal status.

Levels of training of trainers are various, ranging from French baccalaureate plus 2 years of studies (level III) to doctorate. Their work consists mainly of three types of activities: training development (designing, conducting, evaluating training schemes); animation of face-to-face training sessions; accompanying adults in training. The third activity tends to develop in a role of methodological support, due to distance training schemes. Other actors of CVET fill very diverse functions, such as the coordination between the training centre and the company (coordinators), the administrative and financial training management (training managers), the vocational guidance and counselling (counsellors), the management consulting in company (consultants).

Pottier (2005) analysed three critical moments by showing the development of trainer figures in France in narrow correspondence with institutional and legislative developments. Although the practices of adult education already existed in the nineteenth century, especially in some working-class education movements, it is at the end of the Second World War, that the question of adult education and training quickly became a central issue and training for trainers a condition of economic and social development. Their profile was either that of occasional trainers, managers trained to teach in their company, following the model of 'On-the-Job Training' coming from the United States or that of one of working-class education activists, trained in different

techniques to teach in various situational sites. From 1983 to 2000, the number of people working in the adult training sector was multiplied by four, under the effect of the founding law of 16 July 1971. The consultant figure appeared at that time in the adult training sector in connection with the transition to the lifelong learning paradigm. The trainers as an occupational group present three main characteristics:

- **A composite identity**, difficult to frame, reflecting the heterogeneity of the professional training system, realities of work and employment conditions, variety and instability of the work profiles as well as weak regulation of activity until then in CVET system. If the work of Fritsch (1971) identifies early indicators of professionalization of trainers, that of Gravé (2002) led him to distinguish several types of trainers² and to conclude the ‘un-decidable’ nature of the identity of trainers, while noting the absence of a sense of belonging to a recognized profession.
- **The identification of divisions**, on the one hand between the world of public education policies that work for the integration of job-seekers and the development-oriented skills training in large enterprises. On the other hand, a second division occurs between trainers-consultants who respond to requests for problem analysis and training design, manifesting, according to Lescure (2009), a positive identity and other trainers involved in general public schemes related to employment policies. It has also been observed that in the world of management consultancy, where a form of symbolic prestige is crucial in relationships with customers, the title of ‘consultant’ is more appreciated as a ‘better sell’ than ‘trainer’ with regard to clients such as executives and managers.
- **A plurality of professional positions**, between on one hand the senior, the mid-career, junior, highlighted by Hoareau (2009). The seniors constitute an active minority with a strong professional identity, imposing their practices. They master their client list, choices of collaborators and claim an ‘artisanal’ know-how. The mid-career trainers are trying to expand their clientele outside subcontracting and in innovative sectors of training development, while the juniors are adopting new practices of subcontracting with private organizations. On the other hand, Ardouin’s research work (2007) shed light on a variety of statutes and positions in relation to the type and distribution of training and consultancy.

The representation of independent trainers-consultants in trade-union movement

To understand the history of the representation of independent trainers-consultants in a trade union movement between 1990 and 2010, a limited qualitative survey was additionally conducted from May to June 2013, with the contribution of Alain Delahousse, senior consultant in Human Resources. This survey targeted the founders³ of the present trade-union partner in the research. The four semi-structured interviews achieved were seeking to explore the circumstances of the founding of the trade union movement, its evolution over time and reflections for the present and the future. The data gathered provide insight into certain periods in the history of the dynamics of this movement, while leaving many blind spots. Accordingly, the results produced are to be considered as provisional, being based on restricted items, which do not provide at this stage the expected principle of scientific reliability.

The construction of the professionalization of the independent trainers-consultants appears as a continuous and recurrent concern since the creation around 1980 of a pioneering union in the representation of trainers, without any differentiation of status (salaried or independent). In 2000, a schism took place, giving birth to two other labour unions, in addition to this initial organisation. These two new labour unions represented independent trainers and consultants in two distinct regions in France. In 2011, these two professional labour unions merged, to form the present labour union, initiating the call for partnership in research.

In the French union landscape⁴, there exist since this merger, two labour unions of independent trainers and consultants, each claiming to have about 200 members and seeming to be in competition. Setting up training workshops for trainers and summer universities appears as a constant thread in the actions undertaken in view of professionalization. These initiatives are present since the beginning of the first trade union movement. This trend seemed particularly pronounced in the late 1990s, with the creation of a specific training programme and a certification as 'trainer-consultant'. Nevertheless its impact remains unknown and unexplored.

If the interest in professionalization is still very present in the union partner's communication, it seems more connected to an affiliation with AFNOR⁵(X50FP commission) and to the designation of Independent Consultant-Trainer. This strategic choice to base the professionalization on frameworks aiming at the standardization of training processes calls into question the intention expressed in numerous speeches from the trade union for differentiation of their members in terms of added value. The marker of this differentiation would be the production of tailor-made services that requires more needs analysis prior to the training conception than a standardized and normalized response. The lack of reference to professional training cycles and activities⁶ developed since the 1970s for adult trainers in France, is another salient point, which questions the existence of high-level knowledge and know-how, as hypothetical attributes of a profession.

The finding of a wide variety of education and training types as well as levels among the quantitative survey respondents does not constitute a solid enough foundation to support this point and discern what specificity, what basic knowledge to emphasise. Concerning the debate focused on whether independent trainer-consultant can be considered as a profession like professions in law, in accounting, or medicine, the approach of Freidson will allow some answers in the conclusion of this article. According to Freidson (2001), most work is controlled through a combination of three logics: the professional logic, the bureaucratic logic, and the market logic. The professional logic is a way of controlling the work by rules and standards defined by the professionals themselves. The bureaucratic logic concerns rules defined by the state or by organizations and the market logic refers to all power in the hands of consumers. To constitute a profession, the members of an occupation must have autonomy in their everyday practice and control their own work, through several means (Freidson 2001): a knowledge monopoly, a clear division of labour, strong professional education and research, ethical rules and standards, an ideology by asserting commitment to quality of work rather than to economic gain. Some other structural attributes based on the work of Wilensky (1964) can be added:

- A profession is a full time occupation
- A profession has established a training school that may be affiliated with established universities

- It has formed a professional association, which clarifies professional tasks and seeks to eliminate practitioners that do not meet professional standards
- It has a code of ethics for regulation within the profession as well as between professional and clients.

Participatory action research methodology

In this part, after a recall of the research question, the general framework for our participatory research action will be presented and a critical reflection on some sources of adaptation and variations in the research process.

Research question

The title of the participatory action research called ‘Independent Trainer-consultant in 2021’ places it in both a logic of cartography for the trade union and its members and in a prospective logic. Members of the trade union were interested in exploring the possibility of building the professionalization of independent trainers-consultants, taking into account the pre-supposed diversity of their profiles and activity systems. The central research question to address was formulated as such:

- Is it possible to build the profession of independent trainer-consultant?
- A complementary question was: On what can this construction be based?

With regard to the research question, the concept of ‘professionalization’ needs to be clarified. This concept remains difficult to approach because of numerous and various definitions, as the work of Roche (1999) and Agulhon (2001) shows. A first axis of our research work has focused on clarifying this concept, which appeared essential in order to enable trade union members to understand its meaning, with the aim of its appropriation.

The sociology of professions in France developed later than in the United States, leading to recent interest in the field of managers and liberal professions, particularly by Gadéa (2009) and also Dubar and Tripier (1998/2009). Wittorski (2007), in a synthesis of many works, distinguishes three meanings from the observation of social uses of the word that were used for the research.

The first meaning carried by social groups is ‘professionalization-profession’ in a sense of ‘**manufacturing a profession**’ and a ‘**professional group**’. The second meaning carried by education and training organizations is the ‘**professionalization-formation**’ in a sense of ‘**manufacturing a professional**’, that is the development of skills of individuals by articulating training and work situations. The third meaning carried by public or private enterprises, government departments under the influence of New Public Management (NPM⁷) is linked with the generalisation of the word skill, from 1970-1980, in the sense of ‘**professionalization-effectiveness of work**’, that is to say, the search for ‘flexibilization’ of people, the development of approaches by occupational frameworks (Pesqueux 2006). Based on these approaches, the central research question was further operationalized with four sub-questions:

- Can training consultants become an autonomous and recognized professional group?
- What can be said about their work?

- How do they learn their activities?
- How can training and consulting activities be better organized and delivered?

Framework for the multi-year participatory action research

Largely based on Paulo Freire (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, participatory action research has found extension through many others work (e.g. Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Hall, 1994). Initially used to empower oppressed groups in Third World countries, it has a wider use in developed countries. The participatory process itself aims at raising the consciousness of participants so that they may feel empowered to become research partners. This participatory action-research articulated two phases, over a period of two years, with a budgetary allocation of 5000 € per year for the universities partners. The first phase took place from September 2011 to June 2012 and the second phase from September 2012 to November 2013.

A third phase was initially considered to compare the research findings at the European level, but did not occur due to several sources of adaptation and differences, which will be discussed below. The research method was designed to be participatory on four levels: the research team, the focus groups, the trade union members and the steering committee. In phase one, a research team was constituted in a partnership approach by three researchers from universities and three volunteer members of the trade union among which two were also having research activities and experience. The first stage combined a literature review, a workshop and an exploratory investigation. The workshop, carried out with eight people, five union members and three researchers, has developed a tool to feed analysis activities and identities during an exploratory survey, achieved with seven semi-structured interviews (volunteer independent trainers-consultants) and one pre-online survey on the website of the trade-union, based on one single question: *If you had to present your activity as an independent trainer-consultant to someone who wants to do so, what would you say?* It allows gathering thirteen responses out of 200 members.

At the end of the phase one, the hypotheses of low visibility of the independent trainers-consultants, members of the trade union and of professional identities in tension were confirmed. A correspondence between the variety of independent trainers-consultants and the three characteristics of the occupational group of trainers explained before was confirmed. At the end of the first stage, the objectives of the second stage were specified, by refocusing on the analysis of the activity:

- What do independent trainers-consultants do and how?
- How are activities distributed over different segments?
- What professional knowledge is mobilised? What ethical conceptions are implied?

This methodological choice was validated at the reporting steering committee of phase one, with the representatives of the trade union office, and then presented by three members of the action research team during the General Assembly of the trade union in 2012. On the methodological level, the second phase mainly concerned two workshops; a focus group with trade union members (8) on the entry into the profession and on activities; a focus group with representatives of the trade union office (7) on possible orientations in professional development; and two inquiries: a qualitative one into the historical dimension of the union, limited to volunteer founders (four semi-structured interviews); a quantitative one based on an online questionnaire. The research team proposed this last action after the cancellation by the board of directors of the trade

union of a research seminar envisaged with members in one of the partner universities. The presentation of the questionnaire to twenty volunteer members (2 groups in two regions) led to a focus on the analysis of activities and professional skills (56), in a framework both diagnostic and prospective, integrating socio-demographic dimensions and a perception of the current and future situation. One hundred and one past fully informed online questionnaires were processed by simple sorting, cross-sorting and multidimensional analyses.

Sources of adaptation and variation in the research process

The adaptation to the field is analysed hereafter, as well as some sources of variation in the research process, at two levels: the work program and the implication of the actors involved.

Adapting to the research field

By the review of the first phase of research, the fragility of the interfaces with the board of directors and the regional delegations, the weak mobilization of the members and the interferences with other actions launched by the trade union were pointed as obstacles in the participatory research process. In an attempt to overcome these obstacles, the research team proposed a work seminar 'Action Research' organized in one of the partner universities end November 2012. The idea was to have a time for exchange and debate with the trade union members to verify the relevance of the work done in the first phase and to initiate the work for the second phase by bringing out unifying themes and stimulating professionalization in the medium term. This proposal was not adopted in particular because of its proximity with another scheduled event in early November 2012 of the trade union. The idea was then adapted by the research team under the format of study days in late January to generate a collective dimension required for the action research process, to launch the quantitative survey and conduct interviews with volunteer members of the trade union. The project was not validated by the board of directors, the research team had to adapt and re-examine its work schedule by including as an alternative two regional meetings in the form of a workshop, carried out with a weak mobilization (total of 20 participants).

A delay in the completion of the second phase

An overall delay of four months occurs between the initial and the achieved schedule. It can be explained by the adjustments mentioned above: back-and-forth movements in the decision making process about the validation of the survey, a processing time of survey results lasting longer than initially planned, a period of hesitation and confusion in September with an uncertainty on the continuation of the second phase until its conclusion. This delay was generating tensions, which weighed on the action-research process, on its rhythm, on a progressive appropriation of the results produced by the members and on their valorisation.

A degree of variable involvement depending on the actors

Busy schedules for all actors and the tensions generated by the adaptations and the delay had also an impact on the involvement of the partners in this participatory action research. An action-research is also a meeting between cultures and the issues of the actors involved. This learning dynamic needs mutual trust and time to develop. In a constrained environment, the collective dimension has struggled to emerge. The

learning dynamics was all the more reduced which limited the deployment of the action research process.

Core work and career pathways Identified

In this third part, some survey results are presented, starting with socio-demographic characteristics of the 101 respondents and followed by the core activities and the career paths identified.

Socio-demographic characteristics

- An equivalent distribution among men (48%) and women (52%)
- A rather old population in the work world: 52.5 years on average (less than 50 years: 38%; from 50 to 55 years: 27%; more than 55 years: 35%)
- A great seniority and professional experience, a professional origin in the field of CVET for half of the respondents, and a relatively recent activity in the consulting activity and the status of independent

Age/ years of experience	Statistical distribution (101 respondents)
Age	- Under the age of 50: 38%; from 50 to 55 years: 27%; over 55 years: 35%
Experience in the field of CVET	- Under 15 years: 50%; over 15 years: 47%
Experience in consulting activity	- Under 10 years: 60%; over 10 years: 30%; No answer: 9%
Experience as independent	- Under 10 years: 60%; over 10 years: 36%

- About 40% with a status of independent as liberal profession, 30% with business legal status (Limited Liability Company, EURL), 13% auto-entrepreneur and 11% manager of service company or umbrella company (portage salarial).
- An unequal geographical distribution: establishment on 14 regions out of 22. Main concentration on the regions Ile de France, Loire and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur.
- A continuous investment in training for a third of the respondents with diplomas mainly distributed across the levels of French baccalaureate plus 3 to 5 years studies.
- Three main training fields: Management - Communication – Sales.
- Training public mainly composed of executives & managers, company employees.
- A volume of activity equivalent to less than 90 days per year for two thirds of the respondents and more than 91 days for one third.

A core of work in training activities

A predominance of training activities over all others was brought to light, with a statistically substantial over-representation of the independent trainers-consultants (ITC), who devote more than 60% of their time to it. The results concerning the design

and marketing activities are very close: about one ITC out of five devotes more than 30% of his/her time to it.

With regard to the time devoted to the consultancy activities, about one ITC out of six devotes more than 30% to it. Finally, time devoted to development and continuous education and training represents less than 30% for 72% of the respondents. The average of time devoted to the five core activities allows the following ‘ideal-typical’ representation.

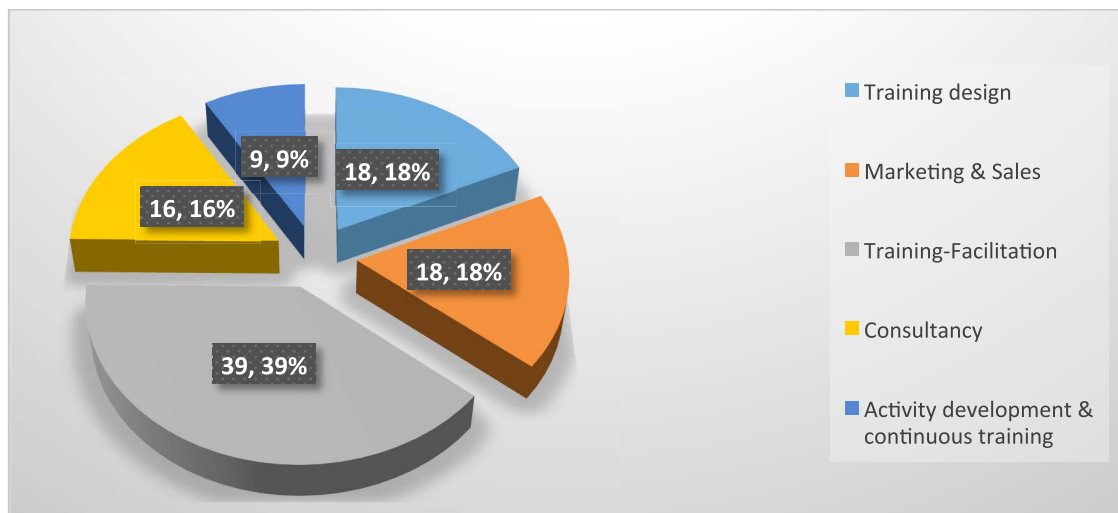


Figure 2: Representation of average time devoted to the different activities in %

Based on these data, it is possible to identify that the ‘core of work’ consists of the activity of training (about 40 % time devoted), to which functions of design and consultancy are aggregated (for about the same time), as well as an important part of marketing and administration activities (about 18 %). The ‘development of own activity and continuous education and training’ part remains the most limited, or perhaps the most constrained.

However, a more attentive examination of the items of this activity segment highlights two observations: Ensuring monitoring and training (items 1, 3, 4, 6) is shared by the majority of respondents (63% to 85%). The production of writings for dissemination and facilitation of networks once again divides the inquiry sample. In addition, certain sections of activity appear as marginal, such as activities related to answering call for tenders, marketing activities (little or not at all effected for 42% of respondents), administrative and management activities (70% not much or not at all).

A variable level of mastery depending on the competencies

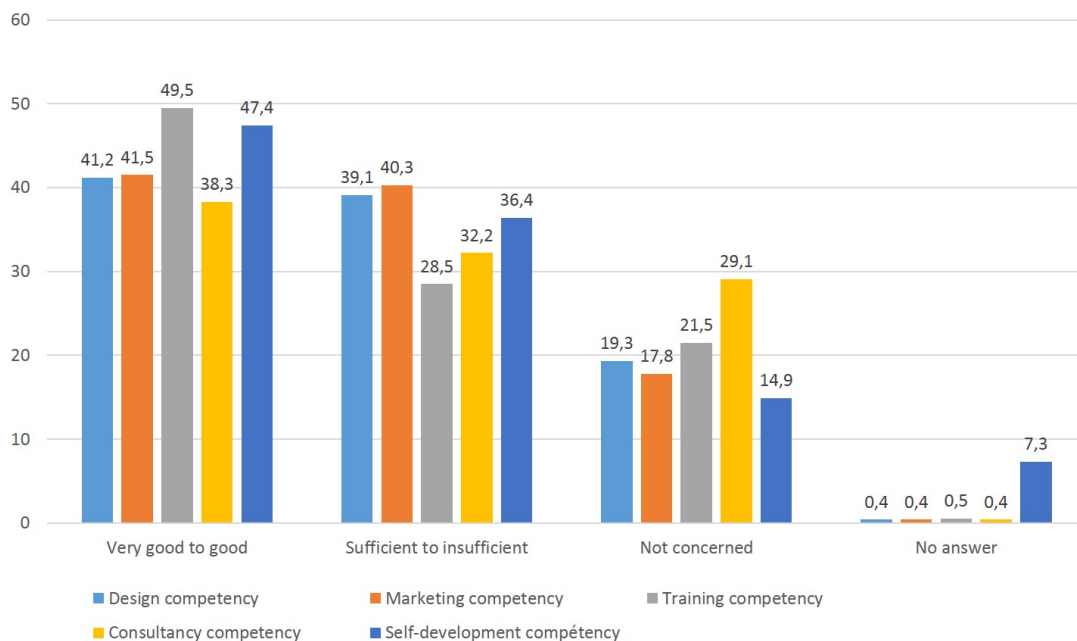


Figure 3: Self-evaluation of mastery level by respondents

In sum, whatever the competencies segment may be, the level of mastery is considered to be from 'very good to good' for 38 to 50 % respondents, with the highest percentage for the core 'Training' competencies. These competencies concern the knowledge of tools and pedagogical methods, the conception of pedagogic tools adapted to various market segments, the development of pedagogical programs. It should be noted that nearly one third of the respondents declares itself not concerned by the core 'Consultancy' competencies, which notably includes the accompaniment of a salaried person to define and implement a professional project, and identifying the required skills for it.

A contrasting perception of the utility of these skills for the conduct of one's activities

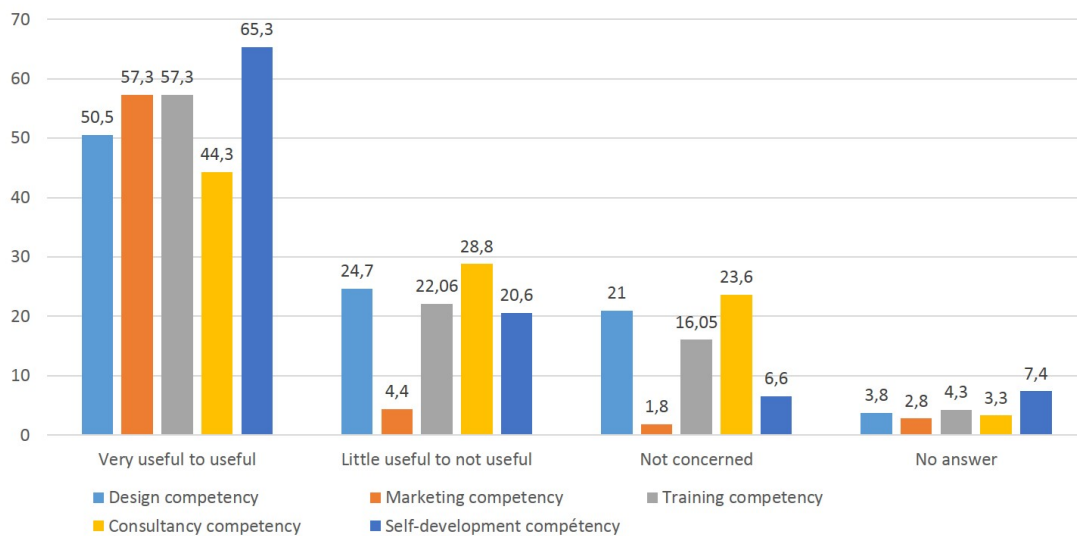


Figure 4: Self-evaluation of utility degree of each core competency by the respondents

The degree of utility of these competencies for professional life is considered for 40 % at 66 % of respondents 'to be very useful to useful'. The presence of training needs, inferred from crossing these two evaluations, is more sensitive for commercial and training design competencies than for the segment of competencies in training facilitating and in consultancy. Finally, a strong concern for the development of activity and own continuous education and training is noticed.

The identification of four 'typical career pathways'

The analysis of career pathways was conducted by crossing data gathered through open questions on the main highlights of the professional pathway that led to their current activities. As part of the first phase of the action research, three types of career pathways were identified through interviews and focus groups: 'by chance but intentional', as a 'break-through' and in a 'generational' order.

The analysis of verbatim as 'typical career pathway' (in the sense of 'ideal type' of Max Weber) is not a description of reality but a forced categorization that seeks to achieve some understanding of this reality. These 'typical career paths' allow actors in that field to examine their own situation and career pathway. Additional data collected in phase 2, led to enumerate four 'career paths' as representative elements to understand trajectory or state (illustrative quotes).

- **A natural pathway**, which takes form in time as a continuity. A priori it concerns to the older members of the profession who refer to the 'generational' dimension where entry into the profession appears to have been recorded in a conflict or a rupture but as a kind of 'evidence', in an environment when entry was easier than nowadays (training development, growth, recognition and need

for external expertise). This ‘natural’ dimension is based on a high education and training level, a network and credibility in the field or intervention. It seems that the independent trainers-consultants appear less in a system of ‘hard proof’ but more in a legitimacy built ‘along the way’ than resulting from a struggle. *Desire to share my knowledge, my discoveries, tools and methods to develop the potential and the individual and collective resources (q137).*

- **A career pathway in a sector that I identify with.** The field or specialty of activity identifies the ITC. This dimension refers to an expertise level (degree, experience, training, technical, sector) and/or a position in a methodological ‘niche’ (skills assessment, skills development). *At the end of 25 years wage-earning activity in a multinational firm (marketing and marketing function), I decided to create my own society specialised in consultancy and training (2010) (q134).*
- **A why not me? career pathway,** refers to a choice due to an external failure (unemployment, mobility, return to France), difficulties and recommendations to overcome them. *After a period of unemployment and difficulties in reintegration into a company in my area, I decided (on the advice of a consultant) on the profession. First I built a training organization and have been independent since (2000)’ (q104).*
- **A career pathway constructed at a biographical stage** with a more positive view of the constraints or breaks and a feeling or desire for freedom. *At 45, I told myself that all parameters were met to try my luck and start my own activity (q28).*

Conclusion

The results of our survey show that the independent trainers-consultants, members of the trade union partner of the action-research, cannot be yet regarded as a profession. The trade union movement of independent trainers-consultants has been developing from the 1980s in a dynamic of social confrontation, i.e. in disputes with other professionals and labour groups for recognition among policy makers and institutional and economic actors in a field that is in strong evolution in France and more generally in Europe. It has resulted in much tension throughout its development between continuity and rupture. Three lines of tension appear to us particularly useful to underline, in order to stimulate reflection and to guide action in the sense of a consistent development of the professionalization of the independent trainers-consultants.

The first line of tension concerns the difficulty in identifying a ‘core occupation’ from which essential high-level knowledge could be analysed and promoted. This difficulty results partly from the disparity of activities and of positioning, and partly from strategic choices by the labour union to increase the number of members. It appeared difficult to count precisely the membership and its evolution in the history of this union. The use of unstable terms shows an approach generally defined by marketing actions, segmenting between members, members up to date with membership payment, sympathizers, and prospects. This raises several questions with regard to representativeness and to sustainability of a labour union for an occupation widely unknown to the general public in France. Is a more limited membership (representative of specific high-level knowledge) better or a large number of indeterminate members? How can a new generation of trainer-consultants be developed and integrated, taking

into account the current average age of the respondents (52 years) and their entry in this job in the context of a second career? Moreover, the ‘core occupation’ that emerges from the results of the action-research is in line with a preponderance of the ‘Training’ activity, revealing a dissonance with that of ‘Consultancy’, which is asserted more in the communication strategy of the labour union.

The second line of tension occurs at the level of professional ethics, strongly insisted on in discourses. In difficult economic times, the risk with regard to the ‘concern for the other’, constituting the act of educating and training, is to focus on the ‘concern for client needs’ in a business sense in a market in rapid concentration, abandoning the ‘concern for adult learners’. Ethical questioning means asking questions concerning oneself as a trainer-consultant, but also and especially relating to the other and the effects of training and consultancy practices and values on his/her future. The issue here at the level of the labour union is the distinction to be made between thinking in terms of ‘code of conduct’ in the sense of rules to be applied and thinking in terms of an ethics charter, that is to say, values, responsibility that construct meaning.

Finally the third line of tension is between three entangled levels: that of individual strategies of the respondents (competition, cooperation, networking, qualification through training) to cope with a certain isolation and pressures felt in their activities; that of the recognition of the independent trainers-consultants as a professional group, based on the added value they bring to the market of adult professional training; and that of the institutional recognition of a labour union as a social actor that tries to participate in decisions concerning its members’ social concerns. These three levels need to be distinguished, to examine the role of the labour union and the nature of its actions, and to build a sustainable professionalization for independent trainers-consultants, in a participative and democratic process.

Notes

¹ The TTnet network was established by Cedefop in 1998 as a pan-European forum for key players and decision-makers involved in the training and professional development of vocational teachers and trainers. In agreement with the European Commission, TTnet was discontinued in 2011 and its activities were taken over by the thematic working group on professional development of trainers in VET.

² He identifies various types of trainers: ‘The insertion trainers’, ‘trainers-facilitators’, ‘technical trainer’, and ‘training advisors working in companies’.

³ Of a list of a dozen individuals, communicated by the partner labour union, four accepted to participate.

⁴ Report on the labour union situation in the training sector in France. Eight unions have been listed, of which six in the branch of training companies, two unions (Employers), one for work-training organizations, the other for training organizations of the social economy and two for independent trainer-consultants.

⁵ AFNOR is an international services delivery network that revolves around 4 core competency areas: standardization, certification, industry press, and training.

⁶ To name a few: those of Bertrand Schwarz, Gerard Malglaive, the University Centre of Economic and Social Cooperation (CUCES) training centre trainers CNAM (C2F), the agency for the development of lifelong learning (ADEP).

⁷ The ‘New Public Management’ refers to the project to infuse entrepreneurship in the state apparatus by introducing market principles of the market in its operation. This project has its roots in Britain in the 1980s. It combines three principles of action -socio-economic effectiveness, quality of service and efficiency, by focusing on programming, coordination, evaluation, implementation of indicators for activity, budget and financial management.

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