Practical Tools for Developing Transversal Skills in Vocational Education and Training

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By

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This book is dedicated to those who trusted us at Ikaslan Bizkaia and BBK, as well as to all the teachers who dedicated their time to us, to the professionals who shared their experiences and reflections with us, and to the students who kindly agreed to try out the ZeharGAIT method to help us improve it. To all of them, *eskerrik asko bihotz bihotzetik* (heartfelt gratitude in Basque).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Unit 2: Teamwork

Unit 2 - Block I: Team Building

Unit 2 - Block II: Stages in the Team Life Cycle

Unit 2 - Block III: Team Leadership

Unit 2 - Block IV: Team Maintenance

Unit 3: Interpersonal Relationships within Organisations

Appendices

FOREWORDS

A SHIP'S ENGINE

NORA SARASOLA
DIRECTOR OF THE BBK SOCIAL PROJECT

Vocational education and training (VET) is a central pillar of sustainable competitiveness. Training people to develop the skills which match the needs of the current labour market and its future prospects is a strategic choice aimed at establishing an environment and a culture that foster economic and social innovation. For years now, through its Social Welfare Fund, BBK has been investing in creating a professional ecosystem that is equipped to tackle new challenges.

Today's world of work presents constant challenges at a time when we are experiencing rapid change. Not only technological change, but also changes in working, management and business models. This new reality means that we need to constantly update training materials, one of the keys to nurturing a talented and innovative generation.

Much has been said about the mismatch between the demands of our economy and society and the training undertaken by professionals. Skills such as teamwork, effective communication, conflict resolution and role management are key to employability. However, traditional training models focus primarily on the acquisition of technical knowledge.

At the end of 2018, IkasLAN Bizkaia's GizaLEADER Programme was launched, representing BBK's commitment to creating an environment and a culture that fosters economic and social innovation. IkasLAN Bizkaia is the Association of Public Vocational Education and Training Centres, offering courses at various levels to over ten thousand students every year. With its highly qualified trainers, its main objective is to provide a modern, high-quality training, committed to personal development of students.

As the great Basque poet Gabriel Celaya would say, "*Education is like putting an engine on a ship. You have to measure, think, balance it, and get everything going*". And I would add that, once the ship has set sail, it needs to be constantly fine-tuned, with regular checks and maintenance. More importantly, every ship needs a good captain who knows how to weather a storm and bring it safely back to shore.

The reader is now holding in his hands an essential tool for strengthening transversal skills and promoting leadership for professional development. It is a unique piece of work that will serve as a guide for Vocational Education students and trainers, not only in Bizkaia, but across the entire world. ZeharGAIT is an eminently practical method, designed to be useful and easily applicable. There are currently no equivalent titles published in Spanish, French, English or German. Therefore, this book will be translated into other languages and made available in a digital, downloadable format.

From the outset, IkasLAN Bizkaia's mission has been to reach out to all students attending vocational courses at public training centres, as well as to large companies and the hundreds of SMEs with which it has close links. The programme was set up to identify and reinforce methodologies for teaching transversal or soft skills, to set up a system to certify the acquisition of different levels of these skills according to VET families, and to equip graduates with personal skills and an intelligent support tool that contributes to effective leadership of their professional and personal development.

ZeharGAIT has just completed the challenge we set ourselves in 2018, that of making a tool available to students, trainers and businesses that is extremely useful for developing skills that are essential in the current labour market, where sustainable competitiveness is an increasingly tangible reality that requires people to acquire these new skills.

After the initial diagnostic phase, which consisted of a dialogue with VET trainers and businesses, and a detailed study of research on the subject in several languages, the project's efforts have been centred around developing a series of teaching units that have now been compiled in the ZeharGAIT manual.

This book is designed to be practical, and aims to be useful for anyone involved in training and developing the skills of future professionals. Published by a prestigious academic publisher, the book includes case studies rooted in real-life situations, maximising the book's usefulness and

bringing it as close as possible to the reality of students and the Bizkaia business sector.

Education is the beating heart that drives the development of the talent that will lead us to meet Bizkaia's future economic and social challenges in a competitive and sustainable manner. GizaLEADER is the ship of which the great poet Celaya spoke of, and ZeharGAIT is the engine that helps it to meet the challenges we face in education and the business sector. In addition, we have the impetus of the trainers who we want to equip with the necessary tools to captain our ship.

We hope that this book will be of great use to those who wish to venture into the brave new waters of Vocational Education and Training.

The ZeharGAIT Toolbox

Eduardo Alzola
President of IkasLAN Bizkaia

Basque VET is deservedly renowned for its effectiveness and for being at the forefront of the field, which has made it a benchmark both in Spain and in Europe as a whole. But success does not mean that there is no room for further improvement. And this applies to the key skills for employment, which of course include transversal skills.

Towards the end of 2018, IkasLAN Bizkaia launched its Giza LEADER programme, with the support of the BBK and under leadership of two Professors of the University of the Basque Contry (authors of this book). Within the framework of this programme, following a diagnostic process carried out in dialogue with trainers from different Basque vocational training centres and companies, we began a process of creating teaching units that would be useful for strengthening students' transversal skills, alongside other tools and good practices already in place. This publication is the result of this process.

The ZeharGAIT handbook offers a practical methodology specifically for working on transversal skills in groups of 6 to 12 students in any of the vocational training cycles within our offer, regardless of the family to which the course belongs. Within this framework, divided into four thematic units, this manual offers a series of ideas for activities that can be chosen according to your needs, with very clear theoretical and practical content and well-structured activities.

Each exercise is accompanied by clear and well-structured theoretical and practical content, presented in two versions. Firstly, there are detailed instructions and suggestions for trainers. Easily downloadable or reproducible materials for use in the classroom are also included. Each unit heading also includes a summary of the main elements which the exercises work on, with useful diagrams and tables. The references section allows you to deepen your knowledge of each area covered by ZeharGAIT, and the joint index of case studies and tools makes it easy to find relevant material.

NOTE ON THE AUTHORS

The authors of this book, Leire Escajedo San-Epifanio and Igor Filibi, have been teaching at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) for more than two decades. They belong to the Faculty of Labour Relations and Social Work, and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Communication, respectively. Leire has two doctorates (in Law and in Biological Sciences) and Igor, a political and social scientist, has a doctorate in International Relations.

In addition to other teaching and research activities, since 2010 they have spent part of their professional lives working on innovative education projects, publishing work in this area and providing training courses for teachers at different levels (higher education; vocational education and training; primary and secondary schools).

They provide consultancy services for diagnosing needs and opportunities for educational innovation; designing active learning tools adapted to different needs; delivering courses to teachers; supporting teachers in designing and implementing self-designed learning tools; and supporting the development of materials and the publication of results.

In general, they have paid particular attention to the development of transversal competences and, in particular, to active learning, which includes: simulations and role-plays; games and gamification for learning; and challenge and problem-based learning.

ON THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK AND ITS TEACHING UNITS

- At the beginning of each unit there is a detailed table of contents as well as some short extracts (selected texts) which situate the unit within the handbook as a whole.

- Theoretical basis: all units have sections containing useful information for teachers. There are also occasional extracts from other potentially useful sources and some important ideas are highlighted in boxes. The aim is to make these materials as user-friendly as possible for trainers.

- ZeharGAIT activities and exercises are highlighted with this image. As well as instructions for trainers, these activities are accompanied by downloadable worksheets for use with learners.

- The activities and units can be completed in any order. In order to facilitate this jumping in and out, at the end of the book, just begore the bibliography, you will find an index of all the case studies and exercises.

UNIT 1

ZeharGAIT Tools

1

WHAT DOES SOMEONE NEED IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THEIR TRANSVERSAL SKILLS?
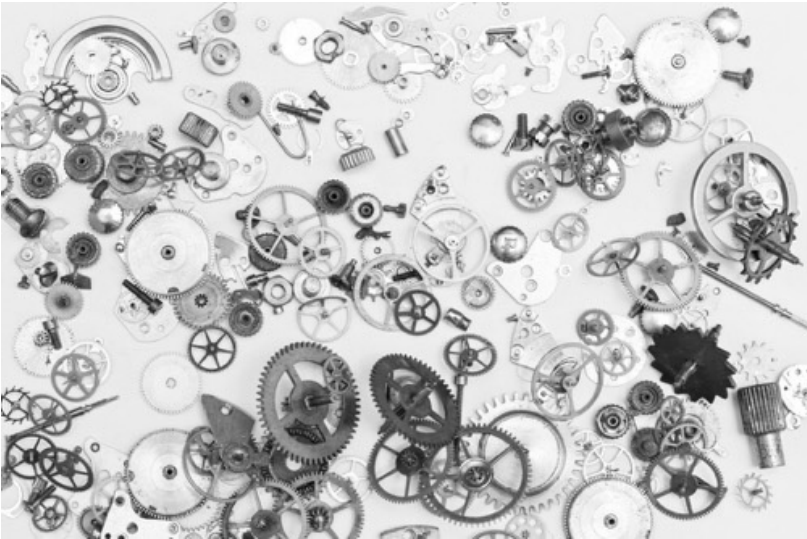
It may be difficult for us to remember the first time we heard people talking about *transversal skills* and other such expressions, but its insistent use in the field of education has created the impression that they are everywhere.

We all think we more or less understand the idea behind these skills. Each time they are listed, we are reminded of the gap there is between what employers expect from young people joining their organizations, and their actual skills and the way they approach integration into their new work team. We are constantly told that nowadays professionals need that *extra something* in addition to technical knowledge (Tulgan, 2015).

And, though it is difficult to describe in detail, we immediately imagine what that *extra something* is. That something makes us feel that someone, beyond being qualified for the post, is *the person we are seeking for a particular job*; someone that, in addition to their job-specific technical knowledge, is a good fit from a human perspective.

 And we say *fit*, because to a great extent and no matter what name we give to those non-technical skills, we are referring to someone being able to fit in when working alongside others. In other words, we are talking about someone who is able to interact in a specific context, and depending on their field and specific job, **in a way that makes the wheels of a business or work team turn smoothly**.

> In some forums, it is quite common to use the term "nice guys, nice girls" to informally refer to people (especially young people) who have the desired transversal skills to fit into a new workplace.
>
> But when we say *nice*, we are not referring to the Cambridge dictionary definition of *kind, friendly or polite*. By *nice*, we mean people who in addition to appropriate training for a particular job, have personal skills that will allow them to interact within the internal structure or work groups of an organization, and to develop their professional career there. People that are *job-fit*, broadly speaking.

Among the formal expressions used to refer to *transversal skills*, some of which we will see in this introductory unit, perhaps the one which best captures the essence of the idea is still "*skills for employment*". After all, it is that extra something, along with the technical training, that combination that makes us a good fit for a job, that will determine our success in getting a job for which we have obtained a professional qualification.

Let us warn you at the outset that this book does not aim to delve into theoretical issues, nor does it attempt to solve them. Much has been written about transversal skills in general and about some of them in particular, and they continue to be debated in educational psychology, business management and other academic and professional fields (Castner-Lotto and Benner, 2006; Wibrow, 2011; Muskin, 2017).

The aim of this publication, based on the experience of the IkasLAN Bizkaia network, is to offer tools to support VET teachers who, on a daily basis and in many cases with very few resources, work to develop the employability of so many young (and not so young) people.

Among all transversal skills, in this ZeharGAIT handbook we have focused on tools for the development of skills that are relevant to:
- *Teamwork*
- *Relationships and interpersonal communication in formal settings*
- *Emotional intelligence, alongside assertiveness and emotion management*
- *Conflict management and resolution*

1. What does someone need in order to improve their transversal skills?

Anyone can improve their soft skills.
They only need two things: the knowledge of how to do it,
and the desire.
(R. Niermeyer)

Consultant Rainer Niermeyer, author of the Kiembaum method *for the development of managerial and executive skills*, said that soft skills are something that everyone has, to a greater or lesser extent, and, therefore, we can all improve them. *Anyone can improve their soft skills*, he tells us. The key is what you need to be able to do it. Niermeyer says what we need is "*the knowledge of how to do it, and the desire*".

The second of these terms, **desire**, shows that it is only possible to develop someone's soft skills with their active participation. In other words, if someone's soft skills are not good, but they do not want to do anything to improve them, it is very difficult to bring about an improvement through external incentives (positive or negative). You can improve your transversal skills at any age; it is a lifelong learning process that enhances: our training and professional experiences, the way we relate to society, and also the way we relate to ourselves (Pellegrino/ Hilton, 2012).

Once our motivation is clear, we come to the second need we have: *the knowledge of how to improve*.

In this book we use the term *soft skills*, which is not strictly a synonym of transversal skills, but has essential similarities to the later: we are talking about people's skills for working with and/or for others.

Soft skills and key skills for employability are not interchangeable either, even if they are sometimes used as if they were. The expression "soft skills" appeared as a counterpart to hard skills (technical skills) in the US army, and "employability skills" is a term that comes from business management.

The term *soft skills* began to be used in the US army (Whitmore and Fry, 1974; Kirchner e. al., 2018) to refer to skills other than the *hard skills* possessed by troops, skills in using machinery or technical instruments of any kind. Skills which are relevant when interacting with others came to be known as *soft skills*, and they were considered at least essential for leaders. In reality, however, many experts in business and work relationships are not particularly fond of the term *soft skills*. They prefer to talk about *key skills for employment* (Wibrow, 2011; Haasler, 2013) This is another term which also appeared in the 1970s.

From the Second World War until then, employment and the economy had experienced uninterrupted growth worldwide. However, the outbreak of the economic crisis would lead to, among other things, high structural unemployment and would have a major impact on young people. In order to adapt to this new reality, the industry underwent profound changes (Nedelkoska/ Quintini, 2018). This is when people began to talk about *key skills for employment*.

> *In the 1990s, this new approach spread into Vocational Education and Training systems and gave rise to the first lists of key skills, although it is in the last decade that this has penetrated all levels of education worldwide (Bowman, 2010).*
>
> *In recent years, in several surveys and studies, employers have indicated that specific technical skills remain essential, but they are no longer sufficient to meet the needs of the labour market (OECD, 2012). Some other skills are required. The two key questions will remain: what are these skills and how can they be developed in people, particularly young people, who are seeking employment?*

How, then, do we go about improving a set of skills when we can't even agree what to call them or been able to list them? Indeed, some people seem to be born with these skills, as if they come as standard, while others struggle to visualise how to improve them.

We are still arguing about the most appropriate way to refer to soft skills and/or *key skills for employability*. Transversal skills, soft skills, core skills, the list goes on... They are used as terms that are closely related, but they are not interchangeable, nor did they emerge in the same contexts. And as for the skills that should be included in the list of those to be improved, there

is no unanimous agreement there either. It all depends on which list or approach we take as a reference point.

According to Brewer and Comyn (2015), three blocks of skills should be included in the list of specific key skills for employability in Vocational Education and Training. The third of these blocks, which they label as "core work skills", is the one that corresponds to transversal skills.

	Core work skills' blocks
Technical skills	specialised skills, knowledge or know-how needed to perform specific tasks
Personal skills	Individual attributes relevant to work, such as honesty, integrity, work ethic
Core work skills	The ability to learn and adapt; to read, write and compute competently; to listen and communicate effectively; to think creatively; to solve problems independently; to manage oneself at work; to interact with colleagues; to work in teams or groups; to handle basic technology; and to lead and supervise effectively

Source: Brewer and Comyn, 2015: 2

Brewer (2013) reviewed dozens of lists of core work skills, drawn up mainly by organizations and employers, across different sectors and in countries around the world, to distil the recurring items found on the majority of lists. These common items were grouped into four broad categories (Brewer and Comyn, 2015:10-11): Learning to Learn, Communication, Teamwork and Problem-solving.

Below is a breakdown of the items which are considered to fall into each of the above categories. From a cursory glance at the lists, it is easy to realise that there are strong links between the attitudes, behaviours and skills in each category. This is particularly evident in the case of teamwork. Working in and taking responsibility for a team requires skills such as adaptability, taking responsibility for oneself (and one's own learning), listening and communication skills, and conflict resolution skills.

The four broad categories of core work skills
and the elements to fall into each
(Brewer, 2013; Brewer and Comyn, 2015)

Learning to learn	Readiness to learn Using learning techniques to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills Working safely Pursuing independent learning Taking responsibility for your own learning Thinking abstractly Organising, processing and holding information Interpreting and communicating information Conducting systematic enquiry, following through to find answers Using time effectively and efficiently without sacrificing quality Selecting the best approach for tasks Beginning, following through and completing tasks Being adaptable

Communication	Reading competently Reading, understanding and using materials, including graphs, charts and displays Understanding and speaking the language(s) in which business is conducted Writing effectively in the language(s) in which business is conducted Writing to the needs of an audience Listening and communicating effectively Listening to understand and learn Using numeracy effectively Articulating own ideas and vision

Teamwork	Managing oneself at work Working in teams or groups Interacting with co-workers Respecting the thoughts and opinions of others in the group Working within the culture of the group Understanding and contributing to the organisation's goals Planning and making decisions with others and supporting the outcomes Taking accountability for your actions Building partnerships and coordinating a variety of experiences Working towards group consensus in decision-making Valuing others' input Accepting feedback Resolving conflicts Coaching, mentoring and giving feedback Leading effectively Mobilising a group for high performance

Problem-solving	Thinking creatively Solving problems independently Testing assumptions Identifying problems Taking the context of data and circumstances into account Identifying and suggesting innovative ideas to get the job done (initiative) Collecting, analysing and organising information (planning and organisation), Planning and managing time, money and other resources to achieve objectives

2

WORK ON SOFT AND TRANSVERSAL SKILLS IN THE BIZKAIA VET SECTOR

As part of the first phase of the GizaLEADER programme, with the support of BBK, a diagnostic dialogue process was implemented with VET centres in IkasLAN Bizkaia's network. It gathered contributions from different trainers from these centres and employers representing businesses that host VET students for internships. Irrespective of the sector to which they belonged, the employers were asked to identify, based on their personal experience, which transversal skills they considered most relevant when hiring staff. They were also asked what advice they would give to those considering applying for a job in their sector.

For their part, trainers were asked interview questions such as:

- *which transversal competences were addressed in the curriculum and how they were selected.*
- *What kind of activities were used in their modules, cycles, or centres to develop or improve these skills.*
- *And how the development of transversal is monitored, assessed and reported to students (formative assessment)..*

Based on the diagnostic phase, GizaLEADER entered into a second phase of work, of which this publication is one of the main outcomes. The aim of this handbook is to respond to some of the needs of trainers and VET centres by providing complementary tools to help raise awareness of employability skills and how they can be acquired. The diagnostic process revealed a conviction that becoming aware of the relevance of communication, problem-solving and planning when it comes to employability contributes significantly to acquiring such skills. This process of awareness also involves a degree of reflexivity, in the sense of being able to look inward at one's own reality.

On that basis, and in an effort to create shared spaces for reflexivity, ZeharGAIT's work units provide meaningful suggestions for learning about transversal skills, designed for medium-sized groups (6-12 students). Meaningful in what way? In the sense of learning about differences in the way people live or are able to live (Dee Fink, 2013), making connections between technical content and abilities and decisions, issues and/or actions that may arise in a professional's everyday life (Woolfolk, 2014; UNESCO, 2015). For this purpose, exercises based on mini-case studies will be used, together with multiple choice questions, and adapted extracts, among other resources.

3

THE ZEHARGAIT MODEL:
A COMPLEMENTARY METHODOLOGICAL
PROPOSAL FOR DEVELOPING EMPLOYABILITY
SKILLS IN THE BIZKAIA VET SECTOR

3.1. The development of the ZeharGAIT model: some introductory remarks

The **ZeharGAIT model** is a methodology designed by the authors of this book, Leire Escajedo and Igor Filibi, to reinforce VET students' employability skills. It is a practical method for working on these skills, designed following an exhaustive research programme stretching over almost three years.

3.1.1 How was it developed?

Firstly, after a prolonged period spent reviewing the existing literature, the authors interviewed managers and trainers at the vast majority of Vocational Education and Training centres in the IkasLAN Bizkaia network. This allowed them to hear first-hand how they worked on these skills in their centres, as well as to get a detailed picture of the trainers, their students and the needs perceived by those directly involved in the VET system. The authors met with management from several businesses to find out what they were looking for in VET students and what they felt was missing or could be improved.

This diagnostic phase was extremely useful for pinpointing the tone of language needed and the focus, as well as allowing us to adapt the method to these concrete needs. A multitude of real-life comments and situations have been gathered and turned into case studies in this book.

Secondly, the authors have used their experience in delivering training courses to VET trainers (on various active learning methodologies), to

clarify the guidelines given to them in the text, with the aim of making this method as effective as possible.

Thirdly, the authors developed a training course for VET students, within the GizaLEADER programme, in order to complement their employability skills before they go off on their internships. This training course was implemented in 2019 and was latterly refined and tweaked based on feedback from participants. This helped identify the ideal type of exercises and methodologies for acquiring knowledge that is eminently practical and cannot be learned simply through theory classes or by reading a manual.

Finally, the authors' conversations with various people at IkasLAN Bizkaia were extremely useful in identifying the institution's needs and finding our way through the complex world of contemporary Vocational Education and Training. This is a sector that has undergone significant changes such as the widespread adoption of the challenge-based learning (CBL) methodology, and the recent introduction of dual models, which combine classes with much more intensive work experience placements (Murua Cartón e. al, 2020).

It is in this context that the *ZeharGAIT model* has been developed. It aims to complement the strategic changes being implemented in Vocational Education and Training, paying greater attention to what businesses are demanding: better training in key employability skills.

3.1.2 What is the ZeharGAIT methodology?

ZeharGAIT is a practical methodology, designed for working with smaller groups of between 6 and 12 people. It relies on a learning framework implemented under the guidance of two facilitators, based on the exercises set out in the different teaching units.

The ZeharGAIT method draws from different sources and combines different pedagogical tools and resources. There are short introductions to some important concepts, followed by illustrative examples. Situations are described and then debated, and different initial self-assessment questionnaires are included. Case-studies, both original and inspired by reflections of various authors, are adapted to focus on their potential for intuitive learning, and customised models for creating and managing groups are laid out. Several news stories and real-world cases are adapted to create a situation for participants, followed by some trigger questions to stimulate