

**FROM THE VAST EXPANCE OF FLEXIBLE CONTRACTS TO THE CORNER OF
ENTREPRENEURSHIP. AN ENTREPRENEURIAL NARRATION**

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ABSTRACT

"Small opportunities are often the beginning of great enterprises". (Demonstene)

In the specific study reported here, we targeted the situation of redundant workers in Italy. Following the review of statistical data 30 workers, who were made redundant by their companies, were interviewed. These individuals, who received a wage compensation by the Government for their total or partial loss of work, have attended the new SPAL (Active Labor Policies System) courses carried out by the Province of Rome.

The aim of this study was to identify the extent to which the 30 individuals who were interviewed, who had good probabilities of leaving the labor market in adult age, already showed some of the key entrepreneurial characteristics. At the end of this study, these variables helped us to understand if and to what extent those redundant workers over 45 years of age had been inclined to start a new business and therefore how motivated they had been to embrace a new way of living and working, based on the development and launch of a new business. This work will present the results and the conclusions that emerged from the survey that was carried out between July 2012 and July 2013.

Key words: entrepreneurship, case study, redundancy, SPAL project.

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INTRODUCTION

Today's reality places individuals in the face of endless doubts and uncertainties about their professional place for the future and, consequently, on their individual future as well. In fact, abandoning the idea of a stable job that we can hold on to through our entire life, in the twenty-first century we are facing an increasingly complex society to which we must be able to respond through our ability to adapt to changing circumstances, thanks to an extensive knowledge and personal qualities.

This uncertainty and insecurity is a characteristic of today's society and it is especially evident in the world of work.

In recent years, statistical surveys have detected a new growing use of atypical contracts, including: project work and apprenticeship - to name a few of the most significant. Today, we are introduced into the labor market more easily, however, it is extremely difficult for us to maintain the professional role we acquire through our professional experience; this adversity deeply affects us both on an individual and on a collective level.

In fact, the individual - temporary worker, feels existential emptiness related to, on the one hand, the impossibility of building a professional self and a life-long project and on the other hand the lack of recognition of a social self as a productive force and of the value of self as an individual.

The complex relationship between atypical work and psychological variables such as: job insecurity, coping, motivation, satisfaction, precariousness of life, also extends to the situation of laid off and unemployed individuals in mobility and shows how regulatory changes in relation to work have had repercussions on work psychology as well. In fact, many of these laid off individuals and unemployed adults, conceal serious psychosocial distress resulting from the constant and practical difficulties of re-employment that affect those who, like them, out of the labor market in mature age, set out in search of a new professional path. Therefore, in our new complex society, it has become vital for us to take care of those categories defined as "disadvantaged" that often feel the irreplaceable desire to be reintegrated into the labor market, sometimes settling for less professionalizing jobs and at other times accepting new and important challenges in contexts they have never experienced before.

Theoretical references pertaining to education on entrepreneurship (Shane, 2003) support the idea that differences of psychological and socio-demographic nature influence those who need to decide whether to take advantage of an opportunity or not and, precisely, their perception of the opportunity determines the intention that precedes entrepreneurial behavior.

From these more recent theoretical models, a study was conducted on over 45 laid off workers in the Lazio Region and the Province of Rome.

The Redundancy Fund is a social safety net that addresses the need to ensure an income for workers in the face of events that can reduce or halt the workers' pay. At the same time, it constitutes a form of aid and support for the businesses which would otherwise incur in excessive costs while waiting to resume normal production activities.

When we speak of workers benefiting from derogation procedures we come across a group of people that are far from homogeneous from different points of view from schooling, to age, to their professional background and to their professional and business prospects.

With respect to the variables considered, we would therefore expect a greater negative impact on the employment older workers (over-45) and of very young people (apprentices and new employees with little or lack of experience) compared to those aged 30 - 45, as well as among less skilled workers with a lower level of knowledge and skills.

One of the basic objectives of the interventions of the Lazio Region as part of the Employment Policy is to overcome the economic employment-related crisis through integrated policies for income support and for the improvement of skills.

Investing on skills and training, thus, becomes crucial not only to support employability and the personal development of individuals, but also for an increased productivity and economic development of the society as a whole.

In fact, if for people acquiring, maintaining and improving their expertise translates into more chances of finding and maintaining employment, as well as career advancement and job mobility throughout Europe, for the production system is essential to be able to count on a skilled workforce, adaptable to changing economic and labor market and able to support the processes of innovation and transformation.

The SPAL (Active Employment Policies System) project consists of training and guidance courses that laid off workers waiting to be employed again or on mobility waiting lists must attend for the recognition of indemnity in place of their pay, as provided by law no. 2 of 2009.

The project is like a regional catalog of active policies pertaining to workers affected by the crisis and recipients of derogation procedures (IGC and Mobility), and the intervention is focused on the following actions:

- Guidance activities aimed at active job search;
- Carrying out of courses or offering professional qualifications;
- Retraining

The Lazio Region has activated the system of Active Policies for Work in October 2009. The available courses made were available to subjects accredited for the professional training and retraining, at employment centers and training agencies of the province.

This study was made possible thanks to the collaboration and the availability of 30 laid off workers who attended the courses of the Lazio Region SPAL at ANCEI Training and Research, accredited by the Lazio Region for higher education, continuing education and guidance in the period 2009-2012.

OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study was to investigate in the interviewees the presence of the considered variables predictive of entrepreneurial behavior, such as:

- perception of themselves and their own ability (*self-efficacy*)
- how to interpret the events taking place (*locus of control* internal/external)
- ability to resort to behavioral strategies in response to stressful events (*coping strategies*)
- willingness to adapt to change in the professional context (*employability*).

For each of the four variables listed above, respondents have been asked some specific questions:

Variable *self- efficacy* (Present): SWOT ANALYSIS

- 1 . What are your strengths?
- 2 . What are your weaknesses?
- 3 . What do you think could be your opportunities?
- 4 . What do you think could be your threats?

Variable *locus of control / coping strategies* (Past):

- 1 . Tell me a story of success.
- 2 . Tell me a story of failure.
3. Three capabilities that you usually use to deal with stressful situations?

Variable *employability*:

- 1 . In the short term, which may be your context of professional marketability?
- 2 . What are your professional goals?
- 3 . Have you ever thought about the possibility of starting a business?

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METHOD

Since this was a qualitative survey, the tool we used was the interview or individual interview chosen in order to analyze, as well as the psychological factors previously established, the moods of women and men that in adulthood are facing a new work reality, characterized by instability and insecurity.

In addition, from the results obtained from the first variable examined on self-efficacy we have carried out the "Swot Analysis", a method of analysis introduced for the assessment of certain individual projects.

This tool of "strategic planning" is used to evaluate the strengths (*Strengths*), weakness (*Weakness*), opportunities (*Oppurtunities*) and threats (*Threats*) of a project.

PARTICIPANTS

In reference to the categories of services offered by ANCEI: orientation, qualification or professional qualification, requalification and professional specialization, it was decided to examine the qualification courses or professional training because their goals (eg, engage in a certain business....) and learning content (eg, elements for starting a business of their own) are in line with the mission of this study, which has the goal to assess some of the key entrepreneurial characteristics among the laid off workers.

This group includes training of longer duration, of 400 hours, for the achievement of vocational qualifications or professional license.

Of this type of activity all the courses available have been taken into account and, depending on the average number of students attending each course, we calculated the number to be interviewed.

The reference sample consisted of n. 30 students/laid off (15 men and 15 women), of which:

- n. 5 caregivers (Specific skills);
- n. 4 bakers - confectioners;
- n. 3 confectioners;
- n. 10 pizza makers;
- n. 3 web designers;
- n. 2 foodservice operators;
- n. 3 nursery school assistants.

The age group considered was between 50 and 60 years of age. This data is very important for the analysis of work motivation, professionalism and the ability to self-employment, since it can be easy to find a high percentage of demotivated workers to return to work and to self employment, since, given the age, many of the respondents could be considered to have reached a security and stability both economic and psychological concerning their productive life.

Once extrapolated from the database of A.N.C.E.I. Training and Research, the list of the 30 workers on redundancy payment in derogation, who were consistent with the social characteristics required in this study, the subjects were given an appointment over the telephone for an individual interview.

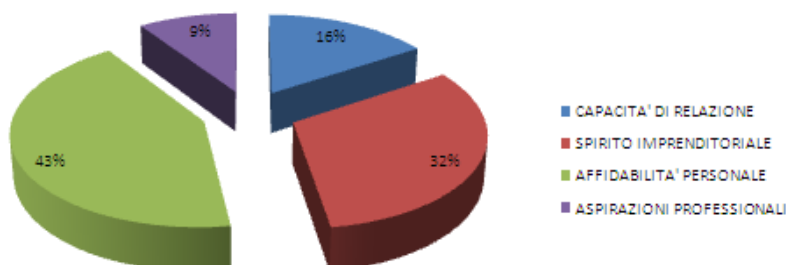
Their response to this invitation was positive. Right from the first telephone call a sense of trust and collaboration was established, without any manifestation of aggression, which could also be predictable.

RESULTS

From the analysis of the data from the interviews we can see the following results according to the variables:

Variable Self-efficacy: aims to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the subjects and the opportunities and threats related to the workers on redundancy payment in derogation.

Figure 1: Strengths



The strengths that have been taken into account in chart.1 are: relationship abilities, entrepreneurship, personal reliability and career aspirations. As it can be seen, 43% of the workers have provided answers related to personal reliability (such as *sense of responsibility, efficiency, reliability, etc ...*). 32% cited the qualities that make one think of an entrepreneurial spirit (eg. *leadership, charisma, courage*), 16% said to have good interpersonal skills (in fact they cited their *family, relationships*, believed to show *affection* and to be *altruistic*), and finally 9% have great professional aspirations (in fact, they view themselves as *dreamers, creative, positive*).

Concerning their weaknesses, the responses obtained from the respondents were grouped into only two categories: low self-esteem (67%) and lack of goals (33%).

The adjectives that are linked to low self-esteem are the following: *anxious, introverted, shy, emotional*; on the other hand, the adjectives pertaining to lack of goals are *lack of planning ability, lack of mental order, laziness and lack of confidence in the future*.

Shifting the focus from how respondents perceive themselves to how they view redundancy in derogation, the third question focuses on the opportunities offered by their situation. The answers are divided into 4 types: professional and cultural growth (50%), mere financial support (20%), greater availability of time (17%), none (13 %).

Those who responded that their experience as redundant workers was *helpful to try out new career paths* and *to have the opportunity of attending specific training courses* fall under the first category, while, those who claimed *this experience gave them more time for themselves, for their families and their relationships with others* have been considered as belonging to the third type of responses, as shown in the chart above.

The last question on the variable pertaining to *self-efficacy* focused on the obstacles and threats of redundant workers. 34% of the sample felt as a threat being a worker over 45 years of age and having to experience prejudice based on their age during a job interview.

33% attributed a major threat to economic instability, 23% believed that their professional inactivity may cause atrophy of the mind, so to speak, causing them to lose their social and professional role which they acquired after many years of commitment and sacrifice. Finally, 10 % said that the redundancy procedures are often abused by companies even in situations that are not extreme. These individuals, therefore, show signs of feeling powerless while confronting a system that does not take them into consideration.

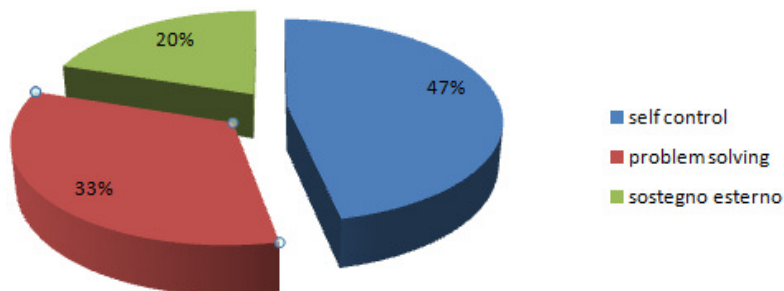
Variables pertaining to locus of control and coping strategies: with respect to the variable pertaining to *locus of control*, workers were asked to tell a story of success and failure related to their professional or personal life to try to identify the reasons they think are behind such events.

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67% of people link their achievements with internal motivations (such as: *I am very committed to this work, I discovered to be gifted for this task, I can be a really nice colleague or friend, etc ...*), while 33 % links them to external motivation (*their particular case, luck, religion, etc ...*).

As it was true for the analysis of the story pertaining to their success, also for the story pertaining to their failure the same two reasons were identified: internal and external. The relevant results from the percentage data attribute personal responsibility to 47% and external influence to 53% of the individuals.

Figure 2: ability to handle stress



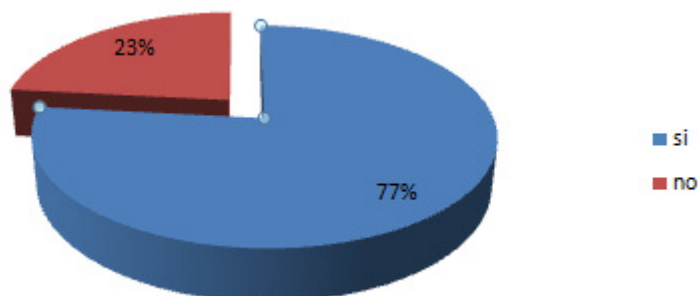
Graph 2 shows that the three skills of stress management, more frequently referred to during the interviews are related to *self-control* (*calm, stability, rationality, emotional detachment*) in 47% of the responses, to *problem solving* (*to face and to overcome a situation*) in 33% of the responses and external support (*psychotherapy, prayer, sharing with friends*) in 20% of the responses.

Variable pertaining to employability: the questions chosen for that variable, intended to investigate the short-term professional marketability, the long-term professional goals, and the presence or absence of entrepreneurial thinking in the subjects that were interviewed.

The question on the short term professional marketability shows two categories of responses: the generic job (for example: *a relational work, clerical, physical and practical*), which received a score of 64%, and a specific field (such as: *restorative, editorial, technical - computer*) which recorded a score of 36%.

For long-term professional goals, the highest response rate, namely 50%, is represented by the hope of finding a satisfactory job. This category also includes the *hope of finding a job that is stimulating, stable and suitable for their professional experience and abilities*. 33% replied that they would be satisfied with any type of work, including a less professionalizing job. The remaining 17% expressed the hope of been able to become self-employed (*"I'd like to get a license to rent cars or taxis"*, *"I would like to start an association that deals with evolutionary psychology"*...).

Figure 3: entrepreneurial thinking



The last question of the variables examined, is to know how many individuals who find themselves in such a precarious economic situation are willing to start a business. The positive answers, as shown in Figure 3, were 77% against 23% who said they had always been reluctant to embark on a similar career path.

CONCLUSIONS

As previously stated, the individuals taken into consideration were chosen based on age (between 50-60 years of age) which, is generally regarded as a factor that severely limits the chances of re-employment.

In fact, as shown by other studies, these individuals have more difficulties than others in terms of retraining and adaptation to new work realities.

From this premise, it is possible to review the data that emerged from the interviews which had the goal of investigating to what extent some of the variables defined as predictors of entrepreneurial behavior, occur within a sample of adults with an extensive personal and professional experience and, therefore, with a psychological impediment that might restrict or impede the motivation to act, and the propensity to self employment.

The findings of this study have all been very significant but 4 are the considerations that, in conclusion of this experimental work, deserve more attention.

Starting from the question on the individual strengths, the first place belongs to the category pertaining to *personal reliability*, since, as it may have been easily predictable, because of their professional and personal experiences, the individuals show to feel responsible, mature, efficient and competent. The second place, however, followed by *ability to establish relationships* (16%) and *career aspirations* (9%) belongs to *entrepreneurial spirit*, with 32% of responses, which encompasses the concepts of leadership, charisma, courage and resourcefulness.

The variable pertaining to weaknesses, on the contrary, indicates that there is a *low self-esteem* in the individuals that were interviewed, 67%, against 33% falls under the group with *lack of goals*. This figure is quite contradictory if compared to the results obtained in the question pertaining to strengths, as described above, and that on the *locus of control*.

In fact, in the variable pertaining to *locus of control* in relation to success, it is clear that 67 % of the people attribute their success to themselves while in the case of failure the influence on the events is attributed by 53% of the respondents to external factors (*the case, bad luck*).

This suggests that these adult workers on redundancy in derogation have acquired a measure

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of personal confidence through their experience, so as to declare themselves to be the ones responsible for their past successes but, given the precarious and unstable economic situation they are facing along with a series of failures due to the fact that they are workers over 45 years of age, they show they are not aware of it, in fact, as previously stated, in their weaknesses the highest percentage of responses relates to low self esteem.

The last interesting fact that emerges from the questions asked on the variable pertaining to employability.

The question pertaining to professional goals mentions the following among the three most representative categories: *a satisfying job, any kind of work* and *self-employment*.

Although the highest percentage is recorded in relation to the hope of finding a job that satisfies and stimulates employees, 17% of the individuals taken into consideration openly declared to be willing to try and start a business and become self-employed.

Finally, on the question pertaining to entrepreneurial thinking, and then the idea of starting a business, the data shows that 77 % of the individuals have always considered this as a valid hypothesis, however they realize that there are too many bureaucratic and economic obstacles in Italy that do not aid them in carrying out possible projects on their part.

The conclusions that emerge from this study is that, despite the workers made redundant over 45 years of age feel demoralized and humiliated by the situation in which they live, these individuals feel within them a strong desire to start their own business or become self-employed. However, as it was already explained the reasons that hinder their initial projects are linked to current social and economic contexts, to the fragmentation of information, a complex typically Italian bureaucracy but, above all, the inability to identify favorable opportunities in relation to personal aspirations and life projects.

Therefore, the role of human actions and psychological aspects linked to entrepreneurship education should not be totally ignored. Entrepreneurship is a skill that has to be promoted, acquired and consolidated not only to develop an independent productive business but also to demonstrate one's own skills, originality, creativity, courage and spirit of initiative. All this is possible and achievable thanks to educational initiatives, targeting , in this specific case, adults over 45 years of age who, often alone, have to deal with the devastating condition of being made redundant by their company .

This study suggests the possibility of promoting new areas of professional development that can help to build and support the construction and development of new professional identities, giving new meaning to actions and procedures.

It also demonstrates the importance and usefulness of specific courses on entrepreneurship as one more chance offered to workers on redundancy who want to reintegrate into the labor market on their own, even through innovative start-ups.

The intention is therefore to cultivate the ability to pursue personal and professional goals with constancy and with long-term aspirations and at the same time to know how to manage these goals in the broadest and deepest sense of the term.

The objective of this study is to encourage the type of entrepreneurial education that goes progresses side by side with lifelong learning throughout an individual's lifespan. We hope it may lay the groundwork for further studies on training and constant and ongoing updating of the best practices and business initiatives focusing on the acquisition of entrepreneurial attitudes and skills, but above all enhancing individual qualities and psychological variables of each individual.

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