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a new spirit of innovation, creativity and critical thinking**

edited by Vanna Boffo and Mauro Palumbo

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# Index

- 4**      **Editorial**  
Vanna Boffo and Mauro Palumbo
- 5**      **The third sector and new frontiers of work. The role of strategic skills**  
Paolo Di Rienzo
- 10**     **Skills assessment and intrapreneurial competence**  
Paolino Serreri
- 15**     **Prison education and training in entrepreneurship: a space to think “otherwise”**  
Alessandra Augelli, Pietro Cavagna, Luca Leccese, Ilaria Oltolini
- 20**     **Developing entrepreneurship through Design Thinking: a new frontier for adulthood education**  
Carlo Terzaroli
- 25**     **The challenge of lifelong learning in adults and for adults**  
Mariadaniela Sfarra
- 29**     **Book Reviews**  
Boffo, V. & Fedeli, M. (eds.) (2018). Employability & Competences. Florence: Firenze University Press, Gaia Gioli

# The third sector and new frontiers of work. The role of strategic skills

Paolo Di Rienzo <sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

Strategic Skills, Voluntary Work, Skills-Based Education, Informal Learning, Validation Of Skills.

### Abstract

*This article discusses the theme of strategic skills, both from the point of view of educational processes, and of their recognition in the context of the vast complex of working activities attributable to the third sector. Reference is made, in part, to the results of a research project carried out at the National Third Sector Forum, which testify how the construct of competence represents the key to describing and analysing work in the third sector. Strategic skills, in particular, constitute resources which are crucial for the innovation of organizational systems and question the fundamental role played by education and the procedures to recognize skills.*

## 1. Introduction: Lifelong learning, skills and certification

The subject of this article refers to the theme of strategic skills in the context of business processes and education programmes developed by the National Third Sector Forum (henceforth also NTSF), as emerges from the results of a research project. This research sought to reconstruct the concept of strategic skills, to study the relevant education and their acquisition within the contexts of formal, non-formal and informal learning, in order to validate them as resources of the executives and managers of the NTSF.

The theme is included among the studies pointing to recognition of the value of experience, particularly among adults, as a resource for learning, also through the rediscovery by individuals in education of knowledge and skills, often tacit, acquired in the various contexts of life and work (Di Rienzo, 2012; Reggio & Righetti, 2013). In effect, the project finds its premises in the change strategies proposed by the lifelong learning model (Alberici, 2008; Morgan-Klain & Osborne, 2007) within the meaning shared by the European Union, in particular upholding the importance of valorizing and certifying learning wherever it has been acquired, especially in so-called 'non-formal' and 'informal' learning (CEDEFOP, 2016).

It is therefore a topic of great interest and crucial importance, since it places at the centre learning, education, and procedures to elicit skills, considering them key to the development of individuals, in civil, social, sustainable and inclusive ways (Di Rienzo, 2014). Moreover, the topics covered by the research lie at the heart of the 2030 Agenda adopted by the United Nations on 25 September 2015 concerning the definition of the objectives of sustainable development.

In particular, as regards the certification of skills, the following documents adopted by the European Union can



be identified as the salient steps:

- Common European Principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (2004).
- Council Recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2012).
- European Guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning (2016).

The universities and the NTSF represent two subjects which, each with their own specific skills and respective responsibilities as defined within their institutional and legislative framework, can work together to create an Italian system to certify skills.

Moreover, this assertion descends from the provisions present in the Italian legislative framework that has been constituted in recent years, which can be represented as follows:

- Provisions on the reform of the labour market in a perspective of growth (Law no. 92 of 28 June 2012);
- Policies for lifelong learning and guidelines for territorial networks (Joint Conference of State and Regions, Agreement no. 154 of 20 December 2012);
- The first Italian Report referencing qualifications to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) of 21 November 2012;
- National Qualification Framework (Legislative Decree no. 13 of 16 January 2013);
- Definition of the general regulations and essential levels of performance for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning, and minimum standards of service of the National Skills Certification System, pursuant to Article 4, paragraphs 58 and 68, of Law no. 92 of 28 June 2012, (Legislative Decree no. 13 of 13 January 2013);
- Strategic guidelines for lifelong learning services and the organization of territorial networks (Joint Conference of State and Regions, Understanding no. 76 of 10 July 2014);
- Definition of an operational framework for the recognition at a national level of regional qualifications and related skills in the context of a national framework of the educational, training and professional qualifications referred to in Article 8 of the Legislative Decree of 16 January 2013, no. 13 (Interministerial Decree of 30 June 2015).

The National Third Sector Forum is the main body representing the non-profit world in Italy. It was set up on 19 June 1997 and is a Social Partner recognized by the Government.

It has been joined by 77 major national organizations of second and third levels for a total of over 97,000 territorial headquarters. On the basis of an agreement compliant with the national one, over the years, 18 regional Forums and around 60 territorial Forums (provincial and local) have been set up, representing civil society active nationwide.

The members of the Forum are supporters of a society of solidarity, which is secular and pluralist, convinced that constant protection of fundamental rights and common goods, quality of life, the environment, and social relations are at the basis of Italy's economic development.

The main objective of the National Third Sector Forum is the promotion of activities and experiences which citizens, autonomously organized in associations, realize nationwide through programmes that guarantee social justice, subsidiarity, and sustainable development.

## 2. Strategic skills from education to validation. New frontiers of work in the NTSF

In the broadest sense, it should be noted that the nature of learning and education in adulthood are the subject of a Copernican revolution, since we are in the presence of extremely complex challenges linked to the increase in inequalities when it comes to access to education, and to the cultural and competence profile and employment/employability of the adult population (Frabboni & Pinto Minerva, 2003; Loiodice, 2004).



This raises a question on the value and strategic function performed by skills of a complex nature – and by the consequent processes to develop these – which refer to the ability for reflection, the proactive dimension of thinking and critical thinking, rather than focusing on instrumental skills and techniques which, although important, are often seen in terms of a literacy more often responsive to needs linked to the realities of society's market.

In this perspective, the conceptual category of strategic skills for lifelong learning finds substantial grounds seen as the capacity to mobilize a wide spectrum of models of knowledge and action in a significant way (Alberici, 2008; European Union, 2006). This concept lays emphasis on the reflective nature of human action, on the ability of individuals to structure cultural behaviour in a global dimension of life characterized by learning potential (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1999). It must therefore be stressed how important it is to build a multiplicity of roads for learning as a condition to spread the ability to learn and to develop reflective thinking. It is important to foster forms of learning that surpass the purely functional dimension in the direction of capability development (knowledge, ability and skills) to bring meaning to one's own and others' actions and to the context inhabited (Bruner, 1990).

The research in question presents itself as an intervention designed and conducted by the Qualitative Methodology Workshop for Adult Education (MetQualFa) of the Department of Educational Sciences at the University of Rome "Tre" and is located within the framework of approaches by competence, of quali-quantitative methods and some recent regulatory devices for the creation of an Italian system of identification, validation, and certification of skills and learning acquired in formal contexts.

With this framework in mind, the research was geared to the concept of strategic competence and the importance this assumes, for the quality of the processes implemented, in particular in the activities realized and coordinated by the Third Sector Forum.

In what sense we can support the peculiarities of the concept of competence, specifically strategic competence, within the NTSF?

This question found a first incomplete response in the recognition by the International Labour Organization (ILO) of voluntary work as a job, which resulted in the legitimacy of the concept of competence within the NTSF: a context which, by virtue of the characteristics of organizational flexibility and adaptability to the needs of the market in addition to being based on technical skills in the strict sense, in the continuous attempt to respond to new needs, tends to develop new frontiers of work, introducing innovations among professional figures and strengthening skills, particularly transversal/strategic ones, of workers and volunteers (Guidi, Fonović & Cappadozzi, 2017; Michelini, Musella, Ragozini & Scalisi, 2016).

On these bases, the research obtained confirmatory results as regards the significance, for the executives and managers of the NTSF, of the areas of strategic skills postulated, on the basis of the latest studies by the sector (Aubret, Gilbert & Pigeyre, 1993; Gherardi, 1998; Le Boterf, 1994, 2008, 2010; Ryken, 2007; Viteriti, 2018):

- managerial and leadership skills;
- personal and social skills;
- collective team and network skills;
- change management skills;
- communication management skills.

The challenges that the NTSF is called to face, in particular in the direction of sustainability and social inclusion, as has been mentioned, require strategic skills across the many different working environments present therein. For education, as the main lever of innovation and the development of skills, the question remains to respond to these challenges.

In the research project, educational activities were implemented to develop the approach by skills (Bresciani, 2012) and procedures to elicit them (Di Rienzo, 2012), in order to comply with the convergence of principles expressed in



the recent third sector reform, the promotion of a society not based solely on knowledge, but geared to increasing social cohesion, participation, and active citizenship.

In this respect, the education pursued the following objectives:

- promoting the acquisition and development of principles, theoretical elements, and knowledge to manage organizational and educational processes based on skills;
- empirically defining and developing methods and tools for the identification and validation of strategic skills and learning acquired in particular in non-formal and informal learning.

planning and education that recall the approach by competence and highlight the crucial role of the educator seen as a guide and facilitator of the learning process. In this sense, the education becomes a vehicle to valorize skills acquired anywhere, and a powerful tool of empowerment for third sector operators.

### 3. Conclusions

The description of the research and the analysis of its results highlight the importance of making use of skills to innovate the organizational processes of the NTSF, particularly as regards education and procedures to elicit skills. On the general level of the results, it can be stated that:

- the construct of competence is the key to describing and analysing work in the third sector and, in primis, that of the executives and managers of the NTSF;
- Given the nature, quality and importance of the problems and processes which question both the work and the skills of the third sector, it is appropriate to gear the governance to the strategic skills of the executives and managers of the NTSF.

This position is confirmed by the results of the quantitative survey from which emerges the importance attributed to education, on the one hand, and, on the other, the importance of consistency in educational experiences in informal learning, which require recognition and validation.

Even on the basis of the research results obtained, it is plausible to argue that the development of an approach by skills represents a cornerstone to redesign the essential elements which characterize the organizations and educational processes designed for adults. This approach has proven to be effective and to be positively correlated to innovation in organizational processes as well as the quality and flexibility of the actual learning processes. In particular, the design and development of devices for the analysis and recognition of past learning and the 'skills portfolio' tool, are proving very interesting for the implications of application that they could have in the context of organizational innovations (Di Rienzo, 2014).



## Notes

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