



## Go Office Interactors' Way!

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### Abstract

*Without categorizing it as being either fortunate or unfortunate one would certainly find it easy to agree that contemporaneity has managed to instill an observable rush within most aspects of life. Backed by an ever changing context people rush into and out of what has become an extensive variety of daily chores: job, family, friends, professional and personal development, all of them insurmountably topped by quantifiers: efficient, effective, profitable, reliable, punctual, dedicated, devoted etc. Many of us struggle, others step out on the way and only a few succeed to do it all, do it right and do it in time.*

*Contrary to the continuous development of science and knowledge in general, omniscience and omnipotence, widely known to be held by gods only and infinitely desired by humans, have now, more than ever before, come to own less practical ground in real world. People cannot accumulate the vast quantity of newly generated information nor can they manage it all. As a result of this, expertise tends to be more and more specialized, deeply fragmenting the same branch. FOCUS has become THE focus of each activity. While specificity and expertise within a clearly delineated domain leads to insight and great discoveries, manners of communicating the findings of that domain to the outer world are nevertheless crucial to it; context is after all the one which sets a product's meaningfulness. A bird's eye view can therefore be the one ring that holds the chain together.*

*This not only adds to the previously mentioned load of "do it all, do it right and do it in time" but it also underlines the importance of distributive attention related to different fields complementary to the one aspect we develop on. If we are teachers we need not only look into teaching but also into learning, if we are sellers we need to learn about selling but also about buying and the ones who buy from us, if we are managers we should know our team and learn a lot about and from the other ones we collaborate with.*

*Office InterActors offers an integrated and integrative methodology to lead beneficiaries up the path of experience sharing, skills and abilities development, input processing and further research. All this is done collaboratively within a complementary team of experts, trainers and trainees using online technologies and direct communication. The Office InterActors courses address the work load aspect by balancing tasks in the course and adapting the course tools to the specificity of the target group. Together with the compulsory field specific expertise, soft skills development raises the chances of employability and work mobility.*

*Thus participation in an Office InterActors course is, beyond a professional added value, an enriching experience in terms of cultural background, foreign languages and ICT skills. It may not take the work load off the participants' shoulders but it will show them how to valorize their abilities, skills and knowledge to simplify things and make their job run smoother.*

Office InterActors (LLP-LdV/ToI/2008/RO/017) is a Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation European project carried out with the support of the Romanian National Agency for Community Programmes in the Field of Education and Vocational Training.



The project was developed and implemented within a European partnership including institutions from Bulgaria, France, Lithuania, Romania, Spain and UK and collaborators from Belgium, Norway and Hungary. The aim of the activities within the project was to develop and test a new training system that would adapt to the time and place affordances of different categories of end beneficiaries: students, unemployed and SMEs staff.

The main products of the project are the Office InterActors website ([www.officeinteractors.eu](http://www.officeinteractors.eu)), the Office InterActors Moodle platform ([www.euroed.ro/online](http://www.euroed.ro/online)) and the Office InterActors Kit (available in physical format and also on the project website). All the above mentioned products lead to the key product of the project, the Office InterActors Educational Model and courses implemented online and offline with the use of the Moodle platform.

After two years of continuous piloting sessions followed by evaluation sessions and improvements of the Office InterActors Educational Model, the project partnership consider they have managed to create a viable product, easily adaptable to any study and work context, flexible enough to accommodate any field specificities without furthering from the initial characteristics of the course model.

If your company wishes to organize in-service trainings, continuous professional updating courses or even team building sessions, then Office InterActors Educational Model IS the one alternative which can do it all, do it right and do it in time. All you need to do is focus on the content you wish to train your staff in and also on the social and professional context within which this knowledge is to be applied. At your choice, Office InterActors experts can help with the course design on these very coordinates or they can adapt one of the already implemented Office InterActors courses to the specific learning needs of your staff.

### **What is an Office InterActors course?**

Office InterActors courses are based on the Blended learning approach, i.e. they are implemented both online and in face-to-face meetings. Course content is uploaded on a customised Moodle area to which enrolled participants have password protected access. Course implementation is monitored by the team of tutors and also by the course administrator who is in charge of the smooth functionality of the technical aspects but also of task completion.

Office InterActors courses are clearly structured in tasks clusters named Steps. Support is offered to both tutors and course participants and assistance is just one click away. Participants have their tasks uploaded on the Moodle platform and they can also upload their answers in specially designed areas on the same platform. In the case of the international teams, communication is done via synchronous and asynchronous online systems on the Moodle platform or other systems complementary to it.

All Office InterActors courses, irrespective of their content focus, include tasks developing on foreign languages, ICT skills and Intercultural awareness.

### **Characteristics of Office InterActors courses**

The one aspect which defines Office InterActors courses is their format structured in the shape of a fictitious scenario based on realistic issues. The imaginary element the scenario brings to the course directly reflects upon the manner in which course participants approach their activity. Using a fictitious scenario creates a relaxed atmosphere and lowers communication barriers for all those involved. Groups or individuals in the course have their own roles to act within the general scenario. Basically the course puts together situational problem solving activities which require more of the participants than an exercise of imagination. This course format requires direct and active involvement of all



participants and relates to their previous professional and personal experience as well as on research and concrete data.

### **Work on an Office InterActors course**

Office InterActors course participants have a complex set of responsibilities. Their primary task is to update their profile on the Moodle platform, contact the others in their group and in the international teams, depending on participation. Knowing the team is a key element in the course as communication and collaboration are at the basis of successful task completion.

Students also need to get acquainted with the general information on the course format, the General learning Goals and General Learning Outcomes. All these are posted at the beginning of the course within the Orientation Area – Step0.

Usually the induction of the course participants is done in a face-to-face meeting, at national level. The role of this stage is to introduce participants to the methodology of the course, to the course format and to the general lines of course implementation. They are also presented the “Students’ role and responsibilities”. This material illustrates, through text and visual elements, main actions students need to take to fulfill their roles. It provides students with a basic technical input to get started on the course; more technical support and assistance in being offered through online video tutorials. Also tutors and the course administrator are available for such input.

During the Orientation Stage the meeting moderator, a tutor of the course administrator, uses a video projector to illustrate work on the Moodle platform (the first steps) and lead students to those platform areas which will provide more input. Although for this specific stage in the course all students need to have access to computers and internet connection, to be able to update their individual profile and explore the platform, during the later stages of the course it is highly recommended to have the students work in groups of 3-4 in front of one computer only. This is enhance group communication and it will naturally set a roles distribution within the national team. Other computers should be at hand though for those tasks which require individual work.

Although the Office InterActors educational model involves both face-to-face and online work, after the Orientation meeting the teams can very easily work online and, depending on their time affordances meet once a week for debriefing and other common decision making.

The Steps following Step 0 will engage students in practical activates meant to guide students to research and discover new input, process it and offer their argueded opinions on. Along previously mentioned foreign languages, ICT and intercultural awareness, each Office InterActors course involves students in negotiation sessions based on the specificities of the domain within which they activate (business, communication, tourism, education etc). This offers participants the chance to share professional experience and expertise and also find a suitable and appropriate way of presenting their opinions in a formal and/or informal environment (depending on the task).

Another core responsibility of the students is to read all the input of the other students and offer constructive feedback. This keeps them anchored to the dynamics of the information uploaded on the platform and directly feeds into the learner generated content corpus; needless to mention the value of variety in the case of international course participation.

### **Office InterActors Moodle platform and in course communication**

The project team, together with the IT experts, have continuously worked on improving the structure, the interface and the affordances of the Office InterActors platform so as to perfectly match the course features and the needs of the learners. The platform has therefore been through various stages of



remodeling. All improvements have been made on the basis of evaluation and feedback received from the partnership team, the students, the team of tutors and the internal and external evaluators of the project.

An Office InterActors course usually has a home page with links towards all the five steps in the course. Within each of these steps students are provided with various different window panels which either present directions and tasks or guide students to those areas where they can upload their input and communicate with the team.

Online communication tools are clearly structured into formal and informal conversations to offer participants a chance to focus on the task based discussions but also be able to conduct other off-tasks conversations with the others on the team. Examples illustrate the manner in which students need to entitle an upload so as to create a timed clear sequence of inputs and replies.

Communication on the Moodle platform is mainly directed by the course administrator through the course tasks. However, in special cases, when task accomplishment deadlines are not met and a firm decision is needed, the course administrator may simply add an announcement in the news area or on one of the course forums. Tutors also intervene to encourage and support students' communication.

### **Staged release of information**

Office InterActors courses on the online Moodle platform are structured in five steps which are to be gradually presented to participants. Students can access the next step of the scenario only when they finalize the previous step. This element of surprise raises their interest in the following stages of the scenario.

Also, gradual introduction into the action of the scenario leaves rooms for tutors to make any necessary adjustments according to the development of the face-to-face and online activities in the course.

The international team of tutors needs to be in continuous contact in order to update the platform with all materials uploaded by students and decide together any changed necessary to better adapt the scenario to the actual progress of the international groups involved.

### **Evaluation**

When it comes to evaluation Office InterActors courses engage all actants in assessment and suggestion making following the under mentioned pattern of action:

Course evaluation by course administrator

Course evaluation by the team of tutors

Course evaluation by the students

Course evaluation by the beneficiary institution

Students' evaluation by the course administrator

Students' evaluation by the tutors

Students' evaluation by their peers – peer evaluation

Students' self evaluation



Results of such evaluations have already been implemented on the Office InterActors Moodle platform. The Office InterActors partnership relies on the received feedback and uses it to match the expectations of those involved in the courses.

Evaluation strategies have been collaboratively developed by the members of the project team and the two evaluators, internal and external have validated them and included them in a final format. The necessary forms were distributed to the entire tutor team and from them on to the students.

This entire process is proof of the quality assurance tools and strategies implemented within the project to ensure a final viable and relevant product.

### **Course monitoring and Moodle platform access**

Office InterActors courses are easily monitored and administered. First of all accessed to a certain course is granted by the course administrator only which means only a clearly defined beneficiary group can enter the course area. For institutions or companies who wish to undertake Office InterActors courses to offer in-service training to their staff, further setting can be made to the platform. For those courses implemented during the work schedule an hourly access can be set. Students will be able to access the Moodle platform only during those hours set by the course administrator.

Changes to the course content and the material uploaded can be made only by those who have an editing right – tutors team and the course administrator. Thus no other participant can alter the material uploaded. Students can only re-edit their own uploads half an hour after their posting.

Activity reports are easily obtained on the Moodle platform. Several types of activity reports can be selected for those activating on the platform. The course administrator and the company benefitting from the courses can therefore clearly monitor individual activity and involvement in the courses. Activity reports register all types of input activities from document reading, document uploading, forum interventions, chat conversations etc.

In conclusion Office InterActors courses can illustrate the level of engagement of each individual/group and can offer the institution supplying the courses, a realistic view upon the course involvement-course results ratio.

### **Why go Office InterActors way?**

The process of globalization emphasizes the need of intercultural and international knowledge and abilities. Companies in all domains gain from hiring staff well equipped in these areas, able to handle both information and communication/ negotiation skills.

Thus, investing in inservice training is one way of having a well balanced team work and products. Office InterActors courses offer much more than simple information. They provide the materials, information, means of implementation and support for lifelong learning. To train your staff using this type of courses is perhaps the best alternative in hand and easy to use with your own team.