

Chapter 5

TOOLS DEVELOPED IN AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE *TIME4HELP* PROJECT IN POLAND

*Dorota Kwiatkowska-Ciotucha and
Urszula Zaluska*

ABSTRACT

The chapter discusses the objectives and assumptions of the Time4Help project in Poland, where solutions were developed for the target group of women aged 45–65. The authors described parts of the model solution and the process of testing it which, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was performed remotely. The conclusions from the testing stage were used to prepare the final version of the Time4Help model.

1. INTRODUCTION

The main objective of the *Time4Help* project in Poland (implementation period: December 2018 – January 2022) was to develop new solutions to support mature women at the age of 45–65. In order to achieve it, we strove to motivate the representatives of this target group to enhance their attractiveness in the labour market by improving their skills and qualifications through various forms of lifelong learning. The need to develop solutions to support mature women in Poland resulted from the analysis of their professional and family situation.¹ The project included extensive primary qualitative (individual in-depth interview (IDI), focus group interview (FGI)) and quantitative (Computer assisted telephone interview (CATI)) research that was preceded by a literature query and desk research ([European Commission, 2021](#); [Eurostat,](#)

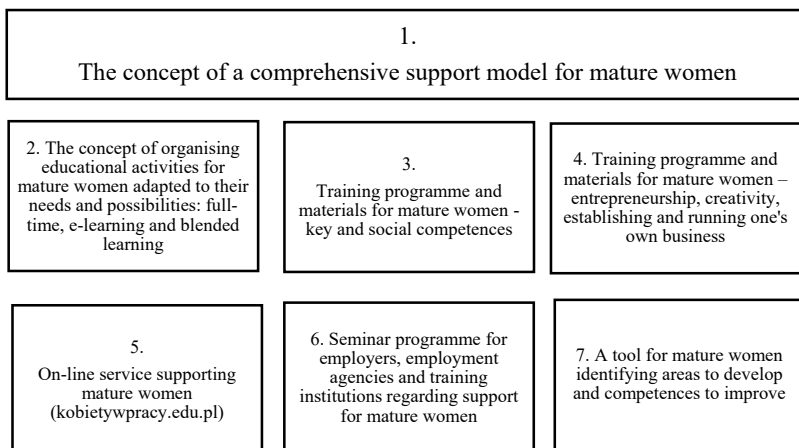
2020, 2021; Report on semiotic research carried out as part of the Time4Help project, 2019). The addressees of the research were, on the one hand, mature women, and on the other hand, the representatives of employers and employment agencies. The model solution took into account the characteristics of mature women belonging to the sandwich generation (SG), whereas its potential users are employers, training institutions and employment agencies (Evans et al., 2016; Friedman, Sung, & Wiemers, 2017; Silverstein, Tur-Sinai, & Lewin-Epstein, 2020). As for employers, it is important to make them sensitive to the specificity of the situation, needs and limitations of mature women. This can be done by learning more about current or potential employees from this group and by providing tools that facilitate their employment and professional development. The involvement of training institutions is an important issue in the context of changing the activity of mature women in the labour market. It is because their training offer makes it possible to bridge the competency gaps and equip women with competences and skills expected by employers. Another group consists of employment agencies that look for suitably prepared job candidates, assess their development needs and provide HR consulting services. The first version of the model solution was tested both in the group of mature women and in the group of users. Conclusions drawn from the testing stage contributed to the development of the final version of the model.

2. TEST VERSION OF THE MODEL

In its test version, the *Time4Help* model consisted of seven parts schematically presented in Fig. 1. These parts are interrelated and complement each other, thus creating a comprehensive solution offering various tools to support mature women.

A brief description of the objectives, target groups and content of individual model components:

- Part 1. The concept of a comprehensive support model is addressed mainly to the users of the *Time4Help* model. Its purpose is to briefly present the content and assumptions adopted in the model, to facilitate the selection of the parts most adequate for specific needs, and to help to prepare the entire model or its part for implementation in a given entity. In this elaboration, we also presented the characteristics of mature women and indicated the main arguments justifying the selection of this group as requiring support in the educational and labour market. In the model implementation procedure for potential users in the form of a diagram, we showed subsequent steps leading to the effective implementation of the model.



Source: Own elaboration.

Fig. 1. The Components of the *Time4Help* Model.

- Part 2. The concept of organising education for mature women is addressed mainly to training institutions and contains basic information on the specificity of mature women as participants of courses and training, as well as guidelines for organising their education in a non-formal system. In this chapter, we presented a short description of formal, non-formal and informal education as well as traditional and modern teaching methods. We discussed the process of learning of a mature person, the role of motivation in this process, existing barriers and strengths, as well as weaknesses of mature women. We pointed to their needs and expectations, placing particular emphasis on the group of women who want to return to the labour market and those who belong to the SG.
- Part 3. The training programme and materials assume 120 hours of workshops aimed at strengthening the key and social competences of mature women. Each workshop has been described in a syllabus consistent with the European and National Qualifications Framework. The proposed set of training courses is a response to the demand reported by mature women and employers who employ them or want to employ people from this target group. The subjects were selected in such a way as to improve practical skills in the areas useful not only in the labour market but also in private life. This part of the model is dedicated mainly to training institutions, and its purpose is to facilitate the planning, preparation and implementation of training courses in the scope relevant to the development needs of mature women.

- Part 4. The training programme and materials assume organising training in small groups. Its aim is to improve the competences in the field of entrepreneurship, creativity and establishing as well as running one's business, including cooperation with other participants of the project. The training course involves 20 hours of classes conducted using the elements of LIFT methodology (learning in facilitated teams – methodology dedicated to team learning) and design thinking. Each training course has been described in a syllabus consistent with the European and National Qualifications Framework. The addressees of this part are mainly institutions offering training whose aim is to structure the development path, help to create professional plans and prepare programmes for their implementation with strong embedding in the market realities.
- Part 5. The online service has been divided into three main areas: self-improvement, work and outside of work. Each of them contains distinct pictograms/icons, specific colours and thematically selected content. The service was created mainly for mature women, and its core objective is to help this group with their professional development and activation in the labour market. The service was built using the Wordpress content management system, and it is possible to use it on mobile devices. An integral yet independently functioning part of the service is the online version of the Women's Self-Assessment Tool, which is part 7 of the model.
- Part 6. The programme of the seminar involves 4-hour meetings for three groups of model users: employers, employment agencies and training institutions. The aim of the seminars is to equip participants with specialist knowledge allowing them to understand and explain the specificity, conditions and limitations of professional and educational activity of mature women; to present the results of research on the situation of mature women in the labour market and in private life; to familiarise participants with the idea of the model and its parts; to analyse the needs and possibilities of support for mature women by implementing the model in a given group of users. This part of the model may also be helpful for coaches conducting training in the age management and diversity in the workplace.
- Part 7. The tool has been developed in the form of tests allowing a given person to independently assess and diagnose her development needs. Its aim was to enable free, quick and easy access to information about, for example, one's own practical skills increasing the probability of successfully finding oneself in the current workplace, evaluation of the level of motivation to develop one's skills and the ability to define

pro-development attitudes or type of work or activities most adequate for individual preferences. The tests were developed in an offline and online form. The offline form was prepared in an MS Excel spreadsheet, and it contains basic formulas for calculating the results and presenting them graphically in charts. In the online form, the tests were programmed and linked to the website (part 5 of the model). They allow users to complete questionnaires and obtain results – quantitative and descriptive – in the same way as in the offline version.

Four parts of the model solution assume direct involvement of mature women, therefore it is worth presenting them in greater detail, especially training, online service and self-assessment tools. As part of the development of key competences (part 3 of the model), we suggested specific topics, mainly in the field of practical use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in professional work and learning foreign languages. The set of training in the ICT area includes:

- using a spreadsheet in budget planning and management,
- creating content for operating new media,
- operating online services based on the content management system,
- online security and the basics of general data protection regulation (GDPR) in using the Internet and
- using new payment technologies useful in business.

The aim of the training, apart from improving the skills of the practical use of ICT, was also to influence the use of interactive tools and the Internet in private and professional life, which is of particular importance during the pandemic. A traditional way of learning a given foreign language has been replaced by competence training in the scope of foreign language learning. The purpose of the workshops is to identify a flair for learning foreign languages and preferred styles of learning, to find out about effective methods of learning foreign languages and to increase independence in learning and managing the process of mastering a given language. As far as social competences are concerned, we put emphasis on the analysis of strengths of image building (also in relationships) and improving the ability to work in diverse teams, including intercultural teams or teams consisting of people with disabilities.

The training in part 4 of the model consists of two modules of creative workshops. In the first module, we assume group work in producing innovative and user-friendly solutions in the field of one's own professional activity (i.e. business activity), the use of design thinking and creative work tools taking into account different points of view (i.e. looking at a problem from

different perspectives), and the principles of the human centered design methodology (creating solutions with people and for people). In the second module, we plan to familiarise participants with the tools of effective financial management and ways of determining the level of profitability of the conducted business activity. During classes, participants are expected to learn to evaluate the profitability of their business and create solutions that can improve it.

The online service for mature women (kobietywpracy.edu.pl) consists of three main areas:

- Self-improvement – a place where one can find information about training courses available on the market and other development opportunities. The most important content: a guide on how to retrain oneself, information on lifelong learning, motivational advice, a guide on entities supporting changes in professional activity.
- Work – an area dedicated to professional development. It contains a guide on how to find a job, write a CV, prepare for a job interview and do well in it, as well as various forms of employment. Some of the content is related to establishing and running one's own business.
- Outside of work – an area of personal development with a lot of useful information about, for example, civil rights, green living, consumer rights, EU subsidies for 'green home' investments, etc. It also includes tips on how to manage one's own home budget, live a healthy lifestyle and keep the right life balance.

For the purpose of the training, the online service was prepared in a way enabling participants, as service administrators and under the guidance of an instructor, to operate it, connect it with profiles in social media and add more content. Additionally, we prepared the fourth area called exchange of ideas. It is a forum dedicated to exchanging ideas and sharing knowledge with other people. Users can access it after logging in.

In the self-improvement area there is a link to tools (tests) enabling users to perform self-assessment of their development needs and professional preferences (part 7 of the model). The questionnaire of the 'development needs' tool consists of 75 statements that can be evaluated on two scales – adequacy for the current situation of the person and the willingness to develop in a given area. The statements cover several areas of development, including practical skills essential for finding a job and professional activity (e.g. recruitment documents, self-presentation, IT tools and foreign languages), motivation for development (e.g. pursuing a goal, willingness to learn new things, openness

to changes and action planning) and development of skills (e.g. creating relationships with others, self-confidence, communication, perceptiveness, stress resilience, time management and initiative and creativity). The test results are calculated as self-assessment of a current situation and self-assessment of the willingness to develop a given area. The questionnaire of the 'professional preferences' tool consists of 32 pairs of statements. Specific elements of the pair represent preferences which, to a greater or lesser extent, characterise the behaviour, views or attitudes of the person undergoing the evaluation in the work environment. The statements were grouped into four main categories, each of which includes two bipolar scales: Preference 1 – cooperation and independent work scales, Preference 2 – exerting influence and performing assigned tasks scales, Preference 3 – independence and safety and stabilisation scales and Preference 4 – diversity and predictability scales. The test results were presented in a chart indicating the prevailing scale within a given preference. Both tools can be used for self-assessment as well as for evaluation performed together with a counsellor/coach/psychologist who, based on test results and additional information obtained (e.g. in the form of an interview with the person completing the tests), can provide educational and career counselling. Both tools are available on kobietywpracy.edu.pl. Part 7 of the model also contains the instruction on how to work with the tool for the person undergoing the evaluation and additional person performing it, a key enabling score calculation and a description of specific scales which is the basis for the interpretation of test results and planning development activities or making decisions related to one's professional life.

3. TESTING IN TARGET GROUPS

The tests in the group of mature women took place from October 2020 to April 2021. After the initial diagnosis of competences, needs and development motivations performed during discussions with the psychologist and coach, we qualified 32 participants from all over Poland for the project. The women represented various backgrounds; they had a different level and field of education, different life and professional experience, different family situation and current employment status. Participation in the project was divided into two stages. The first one included group training (9–12 people), in which the participants could develop their key skills and social competences. The second stage was dedicated to the issues of entrepreneurship, creativity, establishing and running one's own business, and was carried out in small groups of 4–5 people. During both stages, all the women also participated in

meetings with a psychologist/coach. Each participant had three meetings lasting at least one hour – the first one during the recruitment stage, the second one after the end of the first stage and the third one at the end of participation in the project. The aim of the first meeting was to analyse the participant's potential, whereas of the second one – to verify the potential and readiness to take up independent challenges and, consequently, to recommend assigning to a specific group in the second stage. The purpose of the last meeting was to assess the improvement of competences and to develop proposals for further development activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic complicated the testing phase initially planned in a traditional form. The necessity to switch all activities to remote mode resulted, on the one hand, in the need to take additional actions, and on the other hand, in problems with completing the project in accordance with the planned course. Additional activities mainly concerned the development of tools to motivate and maintain the participants' motivation to participate in the project remotely. A large percentage of women who decided to participate in the project required various types of support; some were very confused, and the pandemic made this situation even worse. Remote classes forced a partial shift of the emphasis from skills to knowledge and severely limited relationships between participants. The difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the accumulation of organisational difficulties in professional/private life and the necessity to give up previously made commitments. Some of the women gave up participation in the project for various reasons: an illness, the need to take care of dependent people, a lack of time and conditions for effective participation in training at home. Hardware problems and poor bandwidth/stability of the Internet connection were also additional obstacles. It is worth emphasising that the specificity of participation in remote training, which in a way ensures anonymity and no need to take responsibility for one's acting, facilitated the decision to withdraw from the project. On the other hand, it is possible to point out some advantages of organising all activities in remote mode. For example, we could qualify participants from the entire territory of Poland, and many of them had an opportunity to improve their digital skills in the field of Internet platforms (mainly Zoom).

Summarising the stage of testing in the group of mature women, 32 entered the project, 13 quit it during its course and 19 completed it successfully. Each participant could take part in a total of 128 hours of group training, including 108 in the first stage and 20 in the second one, and benefit from the support of a coach/psychologist and individual training meetings.

The conclusions from the testing stage were formulated on the basis of the results of research carried out in groups of mature women and representatives

of solution users applying various research methods. The research was conducted during the testing stage, at the end of it and during the evaluation of testing results. We used surveys completed by project participants, coaches' observations and their individual assessment of activity of project participants, focussed group interviews with participants and coaches, opinions given by coaches/psychologists, opinions given by experts taking part in the debate summarising the testing stage and opinions of seminar participants for the groups of users. The conclusions concern various areas, from the recruitment process and the organisation of support, through the subject scope of training and methods of conducting classes, to the shape of the model and its components. The main recommendation concerns the form of classes, which for the group of mature women should be conducted in a traditional, not remote, way. Actually, this is how they had been planned in the original version of the model, but the epidemiological situation imposed a different method of implementation. The recommendation results not only from the level of digital competences of mature women and the availability of equipment/Internet connection ensuring trouble-free remote communication. It is also about building personal relationships that help to take up professional challenges and limit involvement in family matters – effective delegation of tasks to other family members (good and reliable methods tested by other participants, previous experience, avoiding problematic issues). In the group of women aged 45–65, at least so far, there has been no confidence in raising such topics of conversation with the use of remote communication. Another issue concerns customising the training offer, that is, offering different development paths to different participants, organising forms of support on a patchwork basis (taking into account the previous experience and level of competences and development needs in the context of professional plans) and ensuring the possibility of choosing several training subjects from a larger pool. According to the participants, the following aspects are also important: the possibility of individual meetings with coaches in order to practise selected elements of a given subject, enabling the exchange of personal experiences, preferably during face-to-face meetings, dividing participants into groups according to their level of advancement (especially in the case of ICT training), organising training courses on certain subjects only in a traditional form that allows participants to experience specific situations (e.g. the specificity of cooperation with people with disabilities). As part of recruitment and promotion processes, it is advisable to provide clear information on goals and methods of providing support together with its expected results, as well as to introduce teasers helping people learn about the content and usefulness of a given course. In the group of coaches and people taking care of participants during the testing

stage, there were also recommendations concerning proper methodological preparation of coaches for educating adults and enabling participants to perform additional exercises, prepare for classes and check the level of understanding of a given topic. According to experts, it is necessary to prepare (in one part of the model) information about the research results concerning the situation of the SG (due to the ‘transparency’ of the phenomenon for most groups of potential users of the model solution, despite a high level of phenomenon in Poland, especially in the case of women working full time). We also recommend developing a concept of an individual path of professional and educational activity of a mature woman, both for employers and supporting organisations, and for mature women themselves.

4. THE FINAL MODEL VERSION

The final version of the *Time4Help* model consists of seven elements which are partially modified versions of the test model, and partially new solutions resulting from recommendations after testing. The main changes involve the introduction of a report from the qualitative research conducted in the project into the model solution and development of two guides on the individualisation of the education process of mature women. The research report is a background for considerations on the importance of the discussed subject and the occurrence of the SG phenomenon in Poland. The guides contain guidelines for potential groups of users of the model solution and mature women. The parts included in the final version of the model are as follows:

- (1) The concept of a comprehensive support model for mature women along with the implementation procedure – suggestions for solutions and possible activities.
- (2) A report with the results of an in-depth analysis of the needs in terms of professional and educational activity of mature women, taking into consideration the specificity of the SG group.
- (3) The concept of an individual path of professional and educational activity of a mature woman – a methodical and organisational guide for employers and organisations supporting mature women.
- (4) The concept of an individual path of professional and educational activity of a mature woman – a guide for mature women.
- (5) Training programmes and training materials – improving various skills and competences mature women.

- (6) Online service supporting mature women – self-improvement, work and outside of work.
- (7) A tool for mature women to assess their preferences (a preferred style of action) and development needs (strengths and competences that require improvement) – offline and online.

New solutions were prepared within the framework of parts 2–4 of the model. In part 2, we discussed the results of research conducted on representative samples in Poland and in selected European countries (the research results and conclusions are presented in Parts A and C of this book). Parts 3 and 4 of the model contain information about: the characteristics of mature women, including the specificity of the SG; the stage of assessing the needs and resources of mature women; selection of training activities in the form of patchwork and other forms of support; and implementation of these activities, indicating the conditions for success. These elaborations contain similar issues, but they differ in the approach towards the subject and the perspective of a potential reader. Part 3 is dedicated to a group of users. It was prepared in a formal style and contains a lot of information confirming the need to engage in the issues of activating mature women and to adapt certain activities to their needs and possibilities. Part 4 is addressed to mature women. It is a typical guide, and it was developed in an informal style. It contains information about, for example, the possibility of improving one's position in the labour market by undertaking various types of activities, including educational and motivational ones, in the field of adjusting professional work to one's own situation and effective communication with the environment. As for the other elements of the model, the main change concerns the combination of training courses in key and social competences with those in creativity into one part of the model solution for supporting mature women.

NOTE

1. Some of the analyses and their conclusions are presented in Chapter 2.

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