

## Picking up the Pieces: Themes in Macedonian Midcareer Transitions

Dr Paul Sudnik  
New York University Skopje  
Republic of Macedonia

FULBRIGHT ACADEMY  
of Science & Technology

Dr. Paul Sudnik



## Context and Background

- Significant change in the Western Balkans
- The word „Transition” is significantly overused
- Experience of change since the fall of communism in other countries suggests that those that suffer most are those who are „not young”

FULBRIGHT ACADEMY  
of Science & Technology

Dr. Paul Sudnik



## Arrival in Macedonia

- I began meeting people who were:
  - in their mid 40s and 50s
  - driving taxis and waiting table
  - spoke excellent English
  - had a University background
- ...Most of them had lost jobs within the last 5 years
- ...but could not find similar employment

FULBRIGHT ACADEMY  
of Science & Technology

Dr. Paul Sudnik



## Consequences of Mid Career Transition

- At best a severance package... at worst not
- Some companies offered training in starting a business... some just showed the door
- But I ask myself, if entrepreneurship is such a great solution, what are the HR managers doing working for that company and dispensing such useful advise instead of starting their own businesses?

FULBRIGHT ACADEMY  
of Science & Technology

Dr. Paul Sudnik



## NYUS Response

- At NYUS we believe that:
  - *Small Places Can Change the World*
- so, we built a research and self help programme around this difficult issue
  - We, as academics, would get material for publications
  - Our clients would (hopefully) get jobs

FULBRIGHT ACADEMY  
of Science & Technology

Dr. Paul Sudnik



## Project Foundations

- Grounded in the literature of career counseling
- Conceived with the intention of seeking an understanding of career transition issues in Macedonia as experienced by individuals of both genders at the midcareer stage

FULBRIGHT ACADEMY  
of Science & Technology

Dr. Paul Sudnik



## Literature

- The literature of career counselling provides several models that integrate practice with theory
- Duly adapted them to our needs and to those of clients
  - e.g. Perosa and Perosa's Mid-Career Change Counseling Model (1987)\*
- Combines a recognition of the psychological dynamics of transition and augmented with practical tools of counseling

\* Perosa, S. L., & Perosa, L. M. (1987). Strategies for counseling midcareer changers: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 65, 558 - 661.

## Participants

- Potential participants in the study were identified through a networking technique
- A condition of participation was that involuntary job loss within the last two years had resulted in an as yet unresolved career transition.
- At the time of declaring participation, individuals would be aged between 45 and 55 years.

## Programme Content

- Participants were provided with a programme made up of:
  - forty contact hours over a three month period
  - unlimited support until their career transition was complete
- Framework provided by Perosa and Perosa (1987) and included:
  - „knowledge of self“ through psychological profiling techniques
  - self assessment of career needs and marketable skills
  - researching and locating data about key people companies in a job search
  - the improvement of written and personal presentation skills e.g. CV
  - an introduction to entrepreneurial activity
  - targeted networking for the creation self made job opportunities.

## Methodology

- Participants asked to take part in four open ended interviews spaced over the period of the programme on the understanding that these would be recorded and transcribed
- Of the thirteen people who attended the briefing, eight chose to participate in the program (three men and five women) and seven (three men and four women) took advantage of the full forty contact hours, contributed to the four rounds of interviews and later validated the case analysis.

## Results and Themes

### *Entrepreneurship*

- Underlying belief that unlikely to work again in a large corporate environment
- ...so entrepreneurship seen as one of the options for the future
- But, this not seen as a liberating and exciting challenge
- Funding of the putative undertakings also raised many questions.
- But, several business plans were created
- In the main these centered around low cost startup ideas often based on the interests and hobbies of the entrepreneur.
  - a small market garden on a piece of land owned by a family member
  - a late night taxi service
  - network marketing also seen as a viable option.

## Results and Themes

### *Employment in a Small Firm*

- The possibility of finding work in a small company was viewed more optimistically
- The main attraction of this route was that it was seen as being less risky than entrepreneurship
- Since all but two of the participants had worked for one firm since graduation, help with the process of reflection about latent skills and life goals was well appreciated as was subsequent assistance in the creation of a resume.
- Three participants gained satisfactory placements in small firms within 10 months of leaving their previous role.

## Results and Themes

### *Portfolio Career*

- The idea of a portfolio career is relatively new in Macedonia and unfamiliarity with the concept probably curtails the opportunities for building a true long term portfolio.
- Other than pointing out that portfolio career building is possible, but difficult, in other countries the career transition programme was seen as being of little value in this area particularly as temporary work was perceived as a transit route to some better future.

## Results and Themes

### *Employability*

- Few had undertaken any training since graduation apart from internal company courses
- Most now felt a strong need to participate in some type of formal training
- Retraining in another area was attractive both as a route to personal growth and as a means of acquiring a skill set that might open up entrepreneurship opportunities
- However, we were unable to identify satisfactory vocational retraining opportunities for midcareer individuals
- Interestingly there seemed to be little interest in undertaking longer term studies such as an MBA, even on a part time basis

## Implications for Practice

- Entrepreneurship was a valued part of the programme
- The greatest value for participants was provided in the areas of career review, resume building, interview practice and job search strategy. In future developments of the career transition program these elements could be strengthened to the overall benefit of the programme.

## Conclusion

- Whilst this work has focused on a micro treatment of career transition in Macedonia it does appear that, without a thriving entrepreneurial culture on a macro level, a small business sector big enough to accommodate the employment aspirations, either full time or temporary, of large numbers of midcareer transitioners may be difficult to develop and sustain.
- I wonder how this paradox can be resolved?

And Finally,

Thank you...