Supervision at a Distance: How to Evaluate the Supervisee

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In addition to the classic form of supervising, in which the supervisor and supervisee work together, lately, due to changes in the labour market, distance learning is becoming more common. Supervision at a distance is necessary when the supervisee and the supervisor are employed in different organizations, and therefore, have no daily contact. Infrequent contact brings many challenges to the supervisory relationship, including how to obtain quality information for a proper assessment of the competencies of a supervisee. In this article, we describe 18 different sources of information through which the supervisor can obtain quality information for the ongoing and final assessment of competences in distance supervising. The list of sources is of course not exhaustive and it rather represents a few ideas for future supervisors to facilitate the approach to their efforts.

Keywords: supervision at a distance, evaluation of competencies, supervised practice, Super Psiholog, European certificate in psychology (EuroPsy)

Introduction

According to the last Eurofounds' survey on working conditions in European Union (EU) from 2016, we have witnessed a significantly changed labour market situation. Demographic, structural, and technological changes are affecting the composition of the workforce, employment levels, job content, and how workers experience their working life. These developments challenge the role that work plays in our societies, with working life actors responding in different ways and have a knock-on effect on work conditions and job quality. Numerous changes also result in increased flexibility on the labour market: Many more people move from one to another job not just at the beginning of their career, but also later, they sometimes need to start their career over in a different professional field. Lifelong learning is a basic need for progress. Therefore, the need for supervision from more experienced colleagues is increasing, not only for young people, but also for subsequent career transitions of more experienced individuals during their career. The article gives some ideas on how to obtain quality information for a proper assessment and evaluation of the competencies of a supervisee in the process of supervision at a distance.

Literature Review

The role of the supervisor is very important in the process of professional training, because a structured

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and targeted learning process enables development of professional skills, attitudes, and values (Zabukovec & Podlesek, 2010). The relationship between supervisor and supervisee represents the zone of proximal development, as presented by Vygotsky (1978). It is the basis for a change in development, an optimal relationship between the level at which an individual can operate independently, and the level of difficulty at which an individual works only with the help of another more experienced person. This more experienced person, in our case supervisor, directs the individual's direction and speed of development to the extent that skills, tasks, and knowledge are internalized, practiced, and derived from them, and becomes self-contained (Paciotti, 2013). In the case of more complex jobs, such as a manager, a salesman, a teacher, a psychologist, and a lawyer, this relationship can last for several years before the novice becomes the master of his/her field. At the same time, the above-mentioned works are not only composed of a lot of parallel activities, but also a strong professional identity, which is built through lifelong learning. Knowles (1990) was convinced that adult learning is very different from how children learn. He is credited with developing different views on non-formal adult learning and is the first to set up the concept of lifelong learning (Alford & Austin, 2013). Knowles (1990) claimed that adults need to know why they should learn something before actually learning, and in 1989, he described two basic principles of adult learning:

1. Adults need to be taught from the point where they can take into account their interests, problems, and concerns; and

2. Adults need to be actively involved in the process of teaching and active research (Alford & Austin, 2013).

Therefore, the role of the supervisor is widely understood as one, which in addition to presenting activities, tools, and their proper use, checking progress, giving feedback, confirming successful tasks, promoting self-reflection, supervising with example, and providing a model for how to be a manager, salesman, teacher, psychologist, or a lawyer.

The best course of supervising is certainly that the supervisor and his/her supervisee work together on a regular and daily basis. However, given today's work over longer distances or organizational arrangements, this classical and effective form of supervising compels other solutions including the use of multimedia devices and communication across different channels. Donovan (2008) identified e-learning as learning with a combination of electronic and experimental learning. He noted that electronic learning enables individuals to exchange experiences, opinions, set up discussions, watch videos and web pages, and engage in interactive web exercises in order to clarify performances and self-reflection. On the other hand, experimental learning allows individuals to interact in a group and focus more on the ability to face inadequate views from personal experience. When using these two different approaches in combination with individuals with knowledge, we can move from the level of passive observation to the level of active initiative within educational processes. Individuals thus exchange and reflect experiences on a voluntary basis and at the same time create and integrate a strong learning experience (Donovan, 2008).

Supervising at a distance is precisely this. In addition to the practical experience of supervising through various channels, we provide an appropriate level of reflection and insight into a given experience and simultaneously the possibility of improvement and progress. At the same time, this way of supervising goes beyond geographical barriers. For example, if a company has a business unit in several locations across the country or abroad, when it happens that the supervisor is in Celje, the supervisee is in Koper, a supervisor in Vienna, and the supervisee in Sao Paolo, the supervising relationship can still exist. Just as a distance could be

an obstacle, it can also be an advantage, since it facilitates the flow of information between different business units or even companies, if the supervisor and supervisee come from various work organizations. In the latter case, the occasional concern is that the couple must also agree on the parameters for the sharing of sensitive information or materials in companies, which could compete with each other. In a supervising relationship, we may encounter information that constitutes a business secret or we may deal with personal data and even sensitive personal information. The relationship between the employee and the employer is in Slovenia precisely defined in the *Employment Relationship Act* (*Zakon o delovnih razmerjih*, 2013), Article 38, Paragraphs 1 and 2, and the treatment of personal and sensitive personal data is covered by the *Personal Data Protection Act (Zakon o varstvu osebnih podatkov*, 2004). The supervising relationship does not constitute a contractual employment relationship, therefore the risk and responsibility for a possible violation of the legislation is largely borne by the supervisor.

To the challenges and the need for supervising some companies have already responded through a variety of supervising initiatives (e.g., Slovenian Human Resources Associations and Ypsilon Association), enabling informal supervising. Regardless of the form, assessing the competencies of a supervisee and his/her progress is a common element in every supervising relationship. In order for supervising to be as effective as possible, it is important that the supervisor knows and understands the competence model. It is important to understand what competencies an individual has already developed and where he/she should pay more attention in order to develop into a competent expert. Supervisor must know how to guide supervised practice in such way, that the situations in which the supervisee finds himself/herself will be appropriate to the level of difficulty that he/she will be able to handle, and at the same time, will learn something from them. Supervisor needs to understand that he/she can help the supervisee to progress, if planning various work tasks, regular reflection, and performance evaluation are done. It is also important to know at the end of supervised practice how to evaluate the level of qualifications the supervisee had achieved in order to work independently in the future (Podlesek, 2016). Jack Mezirow (1991) in his *Transformational Learning Theory* emphasized that learning is a dialectical process and he said that "Every reflection involves criticism". In addition, he stressed that "Every challenge given in the perspective of an individual can result in transformation of the individual". Mezirow (1991) also described the role of supervisor to adult learners as providing "assistance in establishing a critical look at their beliefs and behavior, not just in the moment, but speaking through the perspective of time and the effects these beliefs and behavior have had, with the aim of critical view and reflective action". Critical reflection is the main component of transformational learning. It is important for the facilitator of adult learning to encourage it through a respectful dialogue, as this leads to a new action (Alford & Austin, 2013). But how to get reliable and good information about supervisee's competencies without daily contact? That is a challenge we faced in the Super Psiholog project, while we supervised young psychologists without a daily contact, because they were either employed in another organization or were job-seekers.

In this article, we summarized the ideas about different sources of information, through which the supervisor can evaluate competencies at a distance supervision and described each approach. The Super Psiholog project is strongly supported and based on the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) competence model for supervised psychologists' practice in obtaining a European certificate in psychology (EuroPsy). The competence model designs and connects work activities and our recommendation is that the supervisor and supervisee should plan a curriculum in advance of the process of supervision, to include tailored activities for the supervisee. McMillan (2010) recognized that one of the most important strategies in

the learning process is designing rules, which allow self-regulation and metacognition, combine cognitive, motivational, affective, and socio-contextual factors (Paciotti, 2013).

We presented various approaches and sources for the evaluation of competencies. Different options are needed because some sources of evaluation can be unfeasible or inappropriate in different situations. Their reach is too limited to be useful.

Over time, the supervisor can also formulate a curriculum that links activities in his/her organization with our suggestions for evaluating supervisee's competencies. When such a model of supervision exists, we can then talk about the systematic development of a supervisee for professional work.

Prior to important activity and selection of the source of evaluation, it is highly recommended that the supervisor and supervisee discuss what method to choose and why. The supervisee's participation in the selection of the best source of evaluation is also a form of supervising and encouraging professional thinking. Bandura (1989) asserted that people decide what goals they will set, how much effort they will invest in them, and how much time they will commit in their efforts, especially on the basis of beliefs about their effectiveness. Self-efficacy is important because it directly affects individual activation and it also affects the setting of goals.

Sources for Assessing the Supervisee's Competencies at a Distance

The Supervisor Joins the Supervisee's Meeting as an Observer

The aim of joining the supervisee at his/her organization is to observe the supervisee's work while conducting an activity with a clear purpose. The supervisor observes the supervisee in his/her "natural" environment with the goal of tracking any useful inputs for the subsequent feedback session. Afterwards, the pair jointly assesses the course, content, and success of the meeting.

The Supervisee Submits a Written Report for the Supervisor to Review

This approach is highly recommended as it demands the supervisee's autonomy in the first stages while simultaneously completing his/her work task in the organization. It also enables a written and detailed feedback from the supervisor. Feedback on the written report offers supervision in terms of quantity, complexity, and style of conveying information to the intended recipient(s) and also possible missing, unnecessary, or "off-limits" information.

Role-Playing

Where the supervisee's work includes working with people, role-playing becomes not only one of the most effective ways of learning, but also one of the most useful means to assessing competencies. It is best to choose either a recurring or high-stakes work situation, as this provides the supervisee with a chance to practise while giving the supervisor an insight into practical performance. The scope of possible situations is very wide, ranging from a selection interview to a sales conversation, conflict resolution, and chairing a meeting. At the same time, this approach ensures a safe environment where mistakes are allowed, which is crucial during earlier stages of the process. Role-playing the same or similar situations can also be repeated during the supervision process. In this way, both supervisor and supervisee gain a measure of the rate of change in competency through time. It is highly recommended for the pair to play out an important work situation early on, and then, repeat it halfway and again in the final stages of the process. Role-playing can also be very useful for improving difficult work situations. Here, the supervisor can act as the supervisee and he/she acts as the difficult shareholder, as he/she has a better understanding of how the difficult person behaves. The supervisor can

practically show a new behavioural model of the situation, which can help the supervisee to gain new insights from the difficult shareholder's perspective and see his/her own dealing with the situation in a new light.

Analysis of the Supervisee's Recorded Work on Video

This approach is frequently used in training of new psychologists in Norway and elsewhere, as it enables the analysis of words used and also offers a means to assessing non-verbal cues of both the supervisee and the client. A recording helps to objectively analyze and (self) assess the same situation with deeper understanding with every repetition. Owing to its objectivity and repeatability, it also minimizes biased descriptions of events.

Supervisor Interviews Supervisee's Colleagues

The aim of this approach is to gain a broader perspective on the supervisee's work and cooperation with others from his/her inner circle that knows his/her work and behaviour well. As a learning experience, it is also beneficial to include the supervisee in the process of formation and structuring questions, or at least introduce questions and reasons behind them in advance.

Interviews With Supervisee's Clients

Similarly to the previous approach, the supervisor can conduct structured interviews with selected regular clients. The approach helps the supervisor gain information on behaviour, level of professionalism, persuasiveness, negotiation and "sales" skills, or any other possible competencies of the supervisee. It is recommended to enhance the quality of opinions of non-professional interviewees with those of the supervisee's superior or other experts in frequent contact.

Comparing Expectations Regarding Work and the Supervision Before, During and After the Process

Besides gaining practical experience, building competencies and enhancing theoretical knowledge, the supervision process also extends to familiarization with the wider context of work that may reach into other previously unexpected areas. Every line of work meets with other professional areas at least in some aspects that may have gone unforeseen by the supervisee. Through practical work, he/she usually adjusts his/her expectations and questions along with new experiences. Often, it is exactly this change that signals progress to the experienced supervisor. This is also why it is useful to write down expectations at the beginning of the process, update them during the process and use older "versions" as a reminder of the progress already made in times when progress slows and motivation is low. In a similar way to the changes in expectations and questions, the relationship between supervisor and supervisee might also ebb and flow. The desirable course of the relationship overall is for the supervisor to go from a more directive to an increasingly consultative approach.

Supervisee Writes a Blog and Submits It to the Supervisor for Assessment

Supervisee writes a blog on a topic that can be either of his/her own interest or agreed upon with the supervisor. It is relevant that the context (aim, target audience, etc.) is agreed upon as the blog can be assessed afterwards based on this. The approach enables two things: It offers insight into the supervisee's knowledge and process of thinking, and it offers insight into his/her preferences regarding the quantity, structure, and detail of the content in terms of benefits for the readers. Assessing a blog also works as a tool to improve creativity and writing style that may be relevant to some jobs (e.g., copywriting).

Testing Knowledge Through Structured Reflection

A structured reflection means that the supervisor poses open-ended questions about a concrete situation or from a relevant area of work. This gives information about the extent to which the supervisee knows the subject

and where hidden reserves still exist. Rather than simple one sentence answers, deeper ones suggest knowledge and understanding. It is also important for the supervisor to open different perspectives (e.g., people, time, resources, circumstances, beliefs and attitudes, conflict resolution strategies, etc.).

Supervisor and Supervisee Find a Common Practical Activity

When implementing a supervised practice, it can be an obstacle that we cannot observe the supervisee in a concrete working situation and that is the reason that the evaluation is more demanding and, in some areas, also questionable. It makes sense, therefore, that the supervising couple finds a mutually relevant activity that enables an objective evaluation of competences.

Supervisor Evaluates Supervisee's Report (Work, Product, etc.)

When there is no sensitive content and we also have the consent of the participants, we can give the report in review to a supervisee. In addition to insight into the work, we put him/her into a position where he/she has to critically evaluate the product. From the comments, we can get insight into where the supervisee was focused, what he/she added, what he/she might have overlooked and how deep is his/her understanding of the content. If there are no comments, there are two possible causes for this: a lack of expertise and the fact that we have not established a sufficiently secure relationship for his/her own comment yet.

Supervisee Obtains Feedback on His Work

Supervisor and the supervisee can analyze feedback from a third person (e.g., a client or superior). In the field of education, we can use evaluation questionnaires, in the field of sales and consulting, we obtain content rich information from customers. While in other areas, the source of information can also be a supervisee's colleagues or the manager with whom he/she is in direct contact. We also have to anticipate that it may not be easy to obtain feedback on supervising. The problem can also be the inability to obtain enough relevant feedback. Due to the latter possible problems, we have to prepare a supervisee in terms of the ability to explain the purpose and to ask the right questions so he will obtain as much useful information as possible.

Prepare a Competence Model That is Completed by the Supervisee's Manager

In the last decade in Slovenia, more and more companies and organizations are using competence models to define desired skills and qualities for a good job at a particular workplace. If this also applies to the supervisee's workplace, we can target the aspects of his/her work that have been assessed as weak (ideally supported by the opinions of others, for example by the 360° feedback method). When such a model is not available, supervisor can prepare a short and comprehensible questionnaire, which serves as assessment tool.

Brainstorming, How to Set up a Specific Project

Brainstorming technique is usually used at creating new ideas. We can also use it as a source for assessing competencies. We agree with the supervisee to give as many ideas as possible and also various ways of doing some complex work activity. This method of assessing competencies can be derived for work activities that allow different approaches.

A Virtual Presence of Supervisor at a Meeting Led by Supervisee

If a supervisee leads a meeting in another organization, the supervisor can monitor the way the meeting is conducted via Skype or any other video conferencing tool. The supervisee presents the supervisor to the participants of the meeting and explains the purpose of his/her virtual presence. At the conclusion of the

meeting, the supervisee first gives his/her own opinion on the success of the various aspects of supervising and after that the supervisor offers his/her assessment.

Writing a Diary With a Developmentally Important Topic

When a supervisee wants or needs to better understand and develop a certain important area of his/her work, writing of a diary or periodic reflection is an extremely powerful tool. Such method offers traceability in terms of direction and progress, and thus, the ability to refer to an earlier period. In particular, the latter may have a strong motivational component during periods of stagnation for a supervisee. At the same time, from a regular and deeper recording of work, thoughts, insights, and feelings, a supervisee is also more easily understood and guided by the supervisor's internal process. Such practice can be continued by a supervisee in order to monitor his/her own progress even after the end of supervised practice.

Supervisor Makes a Commentary on a Film or Other Artwork Related to His Work

Before next supervising meeting, the supervisor suggests relevant content to be viewed by the supervisee (e.g., watch the "Horrible Bosses" episode if the current topic is emotional blackmail or "Das Experiment" if it is currently the actual domain of psychological effects of power). Before meeting, the supervisor gives most open questions for a comment on the film, to which the supervisee must answer before their meeting. At the meeting, the supervisor with questions directs thinking and perception of the content to more detailed or systemic aspects of the situation from the artwork. Purpose of this source of evaluation is to gain insight into the supervisee's thinking about the concrete psychological topic that the supervisor encounters in the workplace. The source of evaluation can serve the assessment of competencies through questions, such as "How would you behave in such a situation?", "What would you advise the leader who got caught in doing so?", and "Have you noticed another aspect of yourself yet? How can you improve it?"

Oral Exam

When knowledge is important for the successful completion of the task, the supervising couple can agree on the announced "oral exam".

Choosing the Most Appropriate Source of Information for Competencies' Evaluation

We need different sources of information for competencies' evaluation because some of the sources are not appropriate, non-feasible, or limited in various practical situations, especially in distance supervised practice. Over time, the supervisor can also formulate a curriculum that links the activities in his/her organization with the above suggestions for evaluating competencies. Such a model is a framework for systematic development of supervisee for independent professional work.

Even more important for distance supervised practice is the difference in job tasks between supervisor and supervisee. In this case, it is important to foresee the differences at the beginning of the supervised practice and find alternative possibilities for competencies' development (e.g., different simulations or indirect developmental activities). The purpose of the competencies' framework is to develop all the competencies regardless of the specifics of a particular job or period within a job, when some of the competencies might not be so evident.

We recommend that supervisor and supervisee discuss the sources of evaluation for every competency. Supervisee' involvement in the process of evaluation is a form of supervision and facilitation of professional thinking. Such involvement increases the supervisee's self-efficacy, which in turn influences the goal-setting,

amount of effort, and period of persistence in performing the tasks (Bandura, 1989). Self-efficacy directly connects with the supervisee's activation and goal setting. Furthermore, experience with his/her own supervised practice influences future supervised practice in which the current supervisee will be a supervisor to his/her younger colleagues.

Conclusion

Evaluation of the supervisees' competencies is highly important task in the process of supervision. Described sources of evaluation offer reliable information for the assessment and evaluation of the level of supervisees' competencies in a supervision at a distance. Furthermore, various sources of evaluation demand different levels of supervisees' involvement into supervisory process based on his/her self-efficacy and represent standardised curricula, which should be individualised according to the supervisees' needs. Correspondingly, the supervisors' role in that relationship should be focused to individualised support to the supervisee for establishing a critical look at his/her beliefs or behaviour and aiming to reach a reflective action, which is the main component of transformational learning.

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