

# THE APPLICATION OF MODERN METHODS OF WORKING PRACTICES IN A TRANSITIONAL SOCIETY

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## Background

I initially became involved with Romania as Coordinator of the Scottish Books for Romania Appeal. This was launched by Edinburgh University Library in January 1990 as a result of television pictures showing the Central University Library in Bucharest on fire. At that time I was working in Edinburgh University Library as Head of Donations and Exchanges Department. I was chosen to be in charge of the Scottish Books for Romania Appeal which gathered in over 800,000 books from Scottish libraries, publishers and bookshops of which 100,000 went to Bucharest University Library, the remainder to libraries all over Romania. The books were sent with convoys/lorries going to Romania on which space was bought or occasionally donated. Each box was allocated a specific field of study and a specific location in order for books to reach University, Polytechnic, Special and School libraries that had requested certain subjects.

In 1991 a Medical Librarian in Cluj, Ioana Robu, asked for assistance in the Medical Library field and I arranged for her a month's attachment within Edinburgh, Manchester & Glasgow University Libraries. By 1992 I had realised that if I wanted to change the libraries in Romania, first of all a Romanian Librarian had to be fully trained in Great Britain and secondly I would have to go out and work myself there so that together we could use our experience in both countries to inaugurate a working plan. In September 1992 I arranged for Ioana to spend a year and a half in Scotland to do an MSc in Librarianship at Robert Gordon's University,

Aberdeen : her thesis subject was Automation in Romanian Medical Libraries : the Best Path towards an Optimal Solution. In 1993 I received sabbatical leave from Edinburgh University for 18 months and with Ioana came back to Cluj to initiate the Cluj Medical Library Project. Its aim : to automate the Central University Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy and make it a model for all Romanian libraries to copy. Ioana soon after her arrival back in Cluj became Director of the Library and I have been working alongside her as a Library Consultant ever since.

A server, ten workstations, a Novell network and an Australian library automation system called ALICE was purchased for Cluj Medical Library with single donations from Scottish charities; the total sum raised from these was doubled by a matching SOROS grant. The main criteria for the choice of the automation software was that it could be translated into Romanian, an essential factor, and that it was user friendly with a flexible and easy circulation module. In addition its other modules such as reports, periodicals showed flexible and facile working practices.

In 1994 the library of the Cluj University of Medicine and Pharmacy initiated a grand programme of modernisation in order to keep up-to-date with medical knowledge. A medical library should be one of the focal points of dissemination of information and the library has achieved this with a sweeping programme of automation and an extensive training plan of user education. Between January and February 1994 a successful pilot project went ahead and from February a full training programme for the library staff commenced. Since then every book from 1981-1996 has been catalogued directly on to the system and a unique barcode put inside its front cover. In October 1994 ALICE went "live" - students and members of staff were issued with a plastic borrowers ticket. Public (OPAC) enquiry computers were put at the issue desk and the periodicals department, where details of every book in the library are easily accessed by title, keyword, author, subject and classification in Romanian and English. Details of all medical titles situated in the **British Council Library clearly marked La Biblioteca Britannica** have also been added which will facilitate the reader to access new titles and also safeguard duplication of new acquisitions. Our foreign book room now overflows into two rooms consisting of over 2500 medical books from 1987 up to

1996. All our foreign books are open access and every title regardless if it is a unique title can be borrowed on short term loan.

In 1996 our periodical titles were added to the database and also a rule was made that all periodicals were for consultation only in the library. We had by that time been given a new Canon photocopier and we could uphold this rule by offering on-site photocopying facilities. All periodicals are on open-access now and there is a reading room.

All these things have been possible because of the forward thinking and support of the Rector, Vice-Rectors and Senate of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy. They have allowed a budget of hard currency - albeit a limited one - for the library allowing it to use Western book and periodical subscription agents directly. This assures that new stock is purchased at the most competitive prices; e.g. we receive 10% discount for every book purchase and 2% discount for our periodicals. It also ascertains that the acquisition of foreign material which is in very high demand, presents little problems of accession and the library can use its budget to its best advantage. Again this autonomy is unique in Romania and shows the willingness and open-mindedness of the administration of the Cluj University of Medicine and Pharmacy to raise their profile in the Western world of medical information and technology.

These first few paragraphs show a rapid success story unparalleled in Romania but underneath it all lurk many problems that are inherent in a country that is transgressing a period of transition. These problems prevail not only on account of the Romanian people but also the Westerners and together, their attitudes to and beliefs in each other's societies and working environment. In the field of librarianship, and it also applies to other subject fields, these problems manifest themselves in three different areas: further education, public relations and working attitudes.

## Further Education

Ioana and I, since 1994, have run Courses in Librarianship. These have been so successful that always they have been oversubscribed and have been repeated in Iasi, Timisoara and in 1997, Tirgu Jiu. These courses introduced the modern ideas of Library Management, Public Relations, User Needs and Readers' and Reference Services in addition to the new automated practices of the future library.

When I first started these courses the first thing I noticed was the attentiveness of the participants - the way they wrote down everything I said. I was rather flattered - were my words so useful that they had to record every word I said? Then I realised that noone in the past had given out handouts, for a number of reasons, mainly the lack of material and machinery for duplication and therefore each of the participants were so scared they missed something, they had to transcribe all. When I suggested to Ioana we give handouts, Ioana's attitude was, which I gather is the typical Romanian's, copyright of these lectures would be breached immediately and we would discover them published elsewhere. I pointed out that in the West all lectures are given accompanied by handouts and we commenced handouts with the second set of lectures. Then I came across a further problem which Ioana had foreseen and I hadn't - attendance of lectures. If I was distributing full handouts was there any use in attending the lecture? The answer is yes, of course, because of the workshop which was 50% of the lecture, where everyone had to work together to solve problems or actual events that had occurred within the subject of the lecture. In some ways these events immediately separated the librarians who were really interested in the whole field of Librarianship and who had attended the whole course faithfully, from those who had demanded to come on the course only in order to receive a certificate of participation. The former were enthusiastic throughout the lectures and workshops contributing many interesting ideas and were mainly in the 30-42 age group, in positions of middle-management in their libraries. The latter were those who disregarded the workshops, talking amongst themselves in their little cliques, contributing little apart from the oft-repeated defeatist

statement - these ideas cannot be installed here - they will never work and we do not have money ! Their whole attitude was against any change whatsoever. These italic lines sum up the differences of Romanian librarians today: those who want change and are prepared to work towards it and those who do not want change, call to carry on as before, doing little work and yet are the most vociferous in every protest against prices, increase of hours, work load and changes. I always found the workshops the most revealing of participants' characters. The biggest problem was initially and remains paramount, **to make people work together**. The pre-revolution society learnt to work alone, not trusting each other, competing against everyone, trying to score points against each other. The principal aim of everyone was to have power and this power struggle remains as a deep burrowing grub in Romanian society that leaves its cast throughout the ritual of everyday living and turns everything slowly to wormwood. Much as we would like to think that this power struggle will die out with the future generation, I am not so sure. Many of the enthusiastic participants of these courses, returned to their respective libraries with new ideas, attempting to discuss these ideas with their colleagues and directors and within a few months were suppressed and frustrated - as before - because of: (a) lack of interest, (b) apathy towards innovation, (c) resistance towards change. However there were one or two success stories e.g. Braila Public Library and it is these librarians and libraries that make all my efforts and Ioana's worthwhile.

One last point I would like to offer is that I am not sure that agencies attempting to change Romanian society have the right formula for their choice of trainees. It is common practice to choose the youngest Romanians, those up to the age of 35 years for scholarships, intensive training in new ideas and I am convinced after five years working with Romanians that the targetting should be set between the ages of 35-45. These Romanians have already made their home and family in Romania and are settled. They have a maturity that understands their future lies in Romania, that sees beyond the apparent golden riches of the West and the apparent lack of effort to achieve these riches. They do want to change what is here if they can. Many young Romanians are full of pessimism for the future of Romania which is only further nurtured when they return

from their training and find themselves still in low positions unable to make an impression or initiate reorganisation in a hierarchial system that is impossible to surmount. Some see the only way to the future is to leave the country. The final age group in further education are those between 48-60 who have after or before the revolution reached their pinnacle of their careers and are able to travel under the umbrella of further education. These are the ones who were denied the freedom of travelling before and are now hellbent on seeing every country, sometimes without intelligent selection, attending every conference, making contact with every professional in their field. They insist within the minimum years, to try and overcome the loss of 20 plus years of freedom of movement and spend most of their time out of Romania. Some of this group do select and encourage their younger staff to travel; others prefer that only they themselves go, in case the younger staff come back with new ideas or information unknown to them. In some extreme cases this group will not disseminate the newly imparted information in order to have more power.

### Public Relations

Definition of the above is the state of the relationship between an organisation and the public and/or the part of an organisation's work that is concerned with obtaining the public's approval for what it does!

Public Relations is a chasm in Romanian society - a chasm that will take years to bridge. Regardless of age, from the shop assistant to the post office assistant, the librarian to the government office worker, the weaker class of people served by these public servants are regarded as the lowest form on earth; the elderly, the young, the foreigner are treated with equal disdain and rudeness. Why? As a foreigner why is it so unusual to be met with civility in most shops and hardly at all in government offices. In a post office asking for assistance with a T.V. licence at 7.30am I spoke in Romanian and though I cannot yet be classed as fluent, most people can understand my wishes. In reply to polite and timid questions I was shouted at and after asking for clarification I was rudely asked if I had been drinking, to the great hilarity of another two assistants. A woman behind me when I walked out in disgust, shook her head sadly and said "so it is in

Romania!" In government offices I am either ignored completely or treated along with everyone else (unless of course I have the secret password of an influential name) as a dimwitted fool. In libraries unfortunately too, the art of public relations has not yet been introduced. Libraries, pre-revolution and unfortunately still prevailing post-revolution, were the place where books were kept away from the readers unless of course one was an influential person, a friend of a friend or one bribed the librarian with gifts. Most readers were viewed with suspicion as potential thieves of books. Unfortunately this attitude still predominates and the librarian is viewed with equal suspicion by the public, as a person who is trying to keep the books away from the readers. I have visited many libraries in Romania and though there are always many staff it is not always clear for what purpose! In libraries in Great Britain the reader is the most important aspect of the library : surely that is the principle of librarianship - **to serve the reader**. In the Biblioteca U.M.F. we still have not succeeded to get this message across: we librarians are there to assist the reader with his field of study, whether he/she is a first year student or a professor: each should be treated with equal civility. Yes, there are exceptions - the young student can be aggressive sometimes and impolite but one does not then meet aggression with aggression. Yes, a professor or senior lecturer must be treated with respect and requires a speedier service mainly because of their time limitations and working hours. However, I have seen timid students asking politely for some help from a librarian to be met with a lashing of the tongue and retorts that they are too busy and two minutes later a professor or a friend walk in and immediately the librarian scurries around in order to make an impression. Why the difference - are people not of equivalent importance? Equally, exceptions should not be made to certain people who have curried favour with the staff in the past. Americans have perfected the art of public relations to the ultimate degree but as always with Americans it is almost too extreme. Great Britain has a standard that is hard to beat but I am not advocating that we copy them completely. For Romania to be accepted by the Westerners, a degree of public relations must be instilled into all their Public Services. Remember civil meaning polite makes up 50% of the word civilisation! In every library there should be a secretary or Help Desk who by verbal communication politely will pass the enquirer to

the specialist required. Good public relations means a good impression is made. It will mean the profile of that library, organisation, shop, office or organisation will be elevated into modern times. It means changes have been made successfully and that there is hope for the future. Good public relations costs no money whatsoever, yet it can reap rewards from foreign investors and from the public for evermore. However though I believe we can change at least half the people I think it is impossible to change the majority of the older age group who are so set in their attitudes, who still require the feeling of power to feed their egos and who feed on this dominance in order to gain influence. Unfortunately when the youngsters then enter in the same workplace and are trained by these people, these youngsters in turn take on the mantle of this dominance when they are on their own and exert their authority to the less able public.

### Working Attitudes

Definitely there are problems in Romania regarding working attitudes but I do not solely blame the workers but the whole structure of the Romanian working environment and workplace.

For example the methods of employment are antiquated and do not always permit the correct choice of applicants for the job. In the West we zealously match the right candidate to a specific job and though there are still mistakes made, the structure is in place in order to make the right choice. Second and third interview sessions for applicants are normal - very rarely does the applicant get the job based on half an hour's single meeting. Here the recruitment system is haphazard; personal friendship counts for a great deal; contests are organised with little thought. Advertising of jobs is only done once and if one applicant turns up or just two, even if the employer feels they are both unsuitable, often one is successful in order to save time and trouble. One example of this was recounted to me recently where the interview\contest began at 10am. There was only one applicant and she did not turn up until 11.30am which demonstrates fundamental problems in her working attitude but she was given the job anyway. Since then she has shown the same total lack of commitment and lack of enthusiasm to her job but I gather there are no



ways of terminating her employment. Once in a job, the employee can make the choice whether she works or not, unlike in the West where the choice is with the employer. Why did the employer concerned not declare the contest null and void and readvertise the post just as Ioana and I have insisted on when there was a post vacant in the Medical Library. On the second advertisement we received far more candidates for the post and successfully recruited someone whom we knew would be a valuable addition to our staff.

Regarding references for prospective employees from former employers, I know of many instances where references from the applicant have been accepted on trust without the future employer even thinking of writing personally to the referee and asking their true opinion. Here in Romania references can be bought with a bouquet of flowers, a bottle of plum brandy and a handshake and even though we all are aware of this, the prospective Romanian employer still does not make a point of verifying references. In addition with the new computerised age, anyone - but anyone - can fake a reference on headed paper and we must be aware of that. I know at least of two instances where a reference has been proved to be a fake but it was discovered too late. In the West we have a prerequisite form for references which are sent out by the future employer to the former employer either in advance of the contest when there are only a few applicants and in the case of multiple applications, is sent out after the short list of candidates are compiled, in time for the second interview. If we can initiate such an organised method for recruitment in the first place then maybe we can select those who will improve the working attitudes of all employees and instil initiative, honesty and commitment.

## **Initiative**

Of course the main reason for lack of initiative is due to many years of communist rule where everyone was told what to do and no one was allowed to have their own thoughts or ideas. Obedience to the order, obedience to the one in charge was paramount. This will take many years to eradicate especially in the lower intelligence ranks but I have been surprised at the extent of the lack of initiative for other reasons namely laziness and desire for everything to remain the same, in order to hold on to power or semblance of power already gained. The now outdated idea in modern society that older employees (older here not only refers to age but more so the length of employment) quash the enthusiastic youngster and stamp on their novel ideas, is rampant in Romanian society. In fact it seems to be felt it is the duty to bring the youngsters into line, destroy any initiative, demanding that everything - however basic and non-important it might be - should be first approved by the dated hierarchical structure **or person** in place. Yes, indeed guidance is needed with the young generation but guidance in order to let their own characters grow and expand and their own initiative be nurtured. I listened with dismay recently, in two cases of young teachers, who were full of enthusiasm for their new job, trying so hard to work with the pupils in order to create something new and each were put down in every way possible by the person in charge. Even the pupils seemed to feel this enthusiasm was out of place and one of them commented cynically "In a year or two maximum, this enthusiasm will be knocked out of her and she will be like all the others - bored and **boring!**"

## **Incentive**

With equal salaries for all, apart from a 10% increase for directors, with few merit rises which are allocated either to favourites, equally among **all** staff or to those who require increases for pension reasons, what incentives are there to work harder or longer hours? How can we ask anyone to put more into their work, to work harder without giving anything in return? What can we give if monetary compensation is impossible ?

Encouragement is the easiest thing to give and also some responsibility: pride is another in their choice of workplace and their choice of profession. Promotion using their skills whether it be language or computer skills which is apparent in abundance in many youngsters today and is sadly not always utilised. Taking interest is another thing we can do - interest in what their ideas are, interest in which direction their career hopes are, interest in the youth as adults. In doing these we can encourage a commitment to their job, a responsibility to their boss and an enjoyment and pride in what they do. However care must be taken with the young too as I know of one or two examples where authority and responsibility has been given too quickly without supervision and the result has been a precocious youngster, so full of his/her own importance and who in the end has reverted to cheating the system, even more obviously than anyone else, sure in his/her ability to get away with it, the attitude being everyone does it anyway and the feeling of power it gives them.

## **Honesty**

Lack of honesty is apparent in all working places, in the West too. Cheating the system is another but only in Romania have I seen both done so blatantly and to such a great degree. The saying often quoted "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us" is acted upon with such fervour in some working places that I only wish the fervour could be channelled to our advantage. Hard work is often unknown in places of service though of course there are exceptions: the idea is to do everything you want to do in one's working hours i.e. 8-3pm. This application of work can be read as doing your shopping, sorting out domestic problems, maybe doing translations, anything other than doing the actual work one is being paid for. Many people in their normal working hours do their second job which, let us be honest, is almost imperative to have in the present Romanian economic constraints of high prices and low wages. What I wonder is why this second job is not done in their free time and why the commitment to the second job is always much higher than the state job. Very few Romanians who view the West as the golden paradise realise how hard the Westerners have to work and how long hours they need to

work. Many Romanians ask why I work such long hours, accuse me of being a workaholic and fail to realise that I am a normal Westerner worker, maybe a trifle more enthusiastic than some but certainly not totally **abnormal**. In Great Britain and especially in the U.S.A. all our work for the year is appraised and our salary must be justified however low or high it is. Each task is evaluated to see how long it takes, assessed to see whether it could be done faster or better or by someone on a lower salary, what responsibility is required etc etc. If one does not do the work for what they are paid for then they are sacked: it is as simple as that. Of course there are exceptions which every employer must take into account - domestic problems, personal problems which can account for drastic changes in the employee on a short term basis. However generally speaking I see a bleak future ahead for Romania unless the employees give more commitment to their job. I can foresee no changes occurring in workplaces this generation and future generations without a radical reformation of working practices.