

The System of Lithuanian Customs Qualification Improvement Referring to EU Standards

Beata Grebliauskienė
Customs training center, Lithuania

Chapter 1: Changes causing new requirements to qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers

Changes causing new requirements to qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers are presented in the following aspects:

- changes related to informatization and development of the knowledge society;
- changes related to EU integration and amendments to the legal basis.

During the recent decades Lithuania has and is living through transitions from one time period to another: from the soviet to the post-soviet, from the modern to the post-modern one. This transition is followed by the immensely extensive range of interacting changes. Starting with the different thinking and self-perception of a single person up to global change processes in political, economical, social, technological and other areas. The man has to reconsider his life attitude, the role he plays in interaction with environment, has to learn new ways and methods to perform activities.

These changes are primarily related to society development and gradual transition from industrial to Information (knowledge) society. Phrases, such as e-business, e-Government, e-learning, become increasingly common. Prompt communication, greater significance to knowledge, its constant development and application have determined focusing of increasing attention to informatization of the wide range of processes, computer literacy and knowledge, as well as information processing capacities.

Modern educational curriculum and training methods are closely related to the newest information technologies. Transformations in the training and studying process determine changes of the whole pedagogical system. The goal “to memorize as much as possible” transforms to the goal “to know what is necessary to know, where to find requisite information and accumulate knowledge”.

Lithuanian integration into the European Union is another source of changes. We are undergoing European integration and globalization processes and intense political, social and economic changes, managed through various programmes and projects. Any organization or local community may become active partners in international projects.

Thus our lives become increasingly diverse, intense and demanding much greater geographic, professional and communication mobility from us. We often ask ourselves how to survive through this time of intensive changes, and moreover, how to learn managing these changes and intentionally participating in them? Scientists analyzing such questions state that primarily it is important to “recognize” the situation and make a decision on a respective action afterwards, and check up conditions and possibilities enabling to realize this decision. In all these cases information plays the key role.

In the post-modern society we experience change shifting from a small quantity of stable isolated knowledge to the pluralism of instable and constantly changing attitude systems (Hargreaves, 1999). Such changing, complicated and wide context, complexity of technologies, new production-consumption relations require us to be flexible, mobile, speak foreign languages and have intercultural experience. Then we understand the importance of not only having knowledge and skills, but the importance of learning how to study, as well: asking questions, analysis, information search, collecting, processing, conveying. Individuals have to acquire the following:

- knowledge that is broadly based, allowing a flexible response to changes;
- solid foundation skills that support learning;
- adequate cognitive skills and higher order cognitive thinking skills;
- substantial experience in applying knowledge and skills to unfamiliar problems;
- habits of exercising choice;
- respect for differences and for shared rules of citizenship that establish the grounds for trust and cooperation.

Chapter 2. The system of qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers

The system of qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers is presented in the following aspects:

- principles – the grounds for the qualification improvement system of Lithuanian Customs officers;
- institutions providing qualifications improvement services of Lithuanian Customs officers;
- assurance of training quality and systematic training principle for Lithuanian Customs officers.

For more than a decade higher educational establishments and universities discuss training specialists for tomorrow, i.e., training of specialists for the future. United backing is gained by the opinion that today narrow profile specialists with the finite education, the finite quantity of knowledge and skills required for a respective work, may no longer be trained. Targeting increases to wide profile and flexible specialists with sufficient basic education, allowing for further flexible improvement subject to needs.

Similarly we may no longer talk today about the finite qualification improvement and providing the finite amount of knowledge and skills, as the changing environment requires still new knowledge and skills from employees. This is especially notable talking about qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers.

Lithuanian Customs Statute stipulates the provision about an officer's position unrelated to performing the official functions in a specific post. An officer of a Customs post is recruited only by a certain territorial Customs Office (i.e., the territorial Customs Office is the officer's workplace). The place of performing the official functions – the specific post - may change, i.e., if needed, the officer may be transferred from one post to another. Taking the characteristics of posts (railway, cargo, road, seaport and airport) into account it may be stated that the need for new knowledge and skills emerges together with such transfer. On the other hand, intense changes of the legal basis determine major changes of knowledge and skills needed to do one's work.

The new Lithuanian Customs Officer Training Strategy approved on November 6, 2002, stresses that training serves as the fundamental tool to improve administrative capacities of Customs officers, to ensure a good public image of the Customs, to develop favorable conditions for accession to the European Union and to successfully meet Lithuanian obligations after the accession. Improvement of the administrative capacities of Customs officers is encouraged by Lithuanian obligations to ensure security of the enlarged external EU border and to perform the ascribed functions in all areas of customs activities realizing the importance of the *Acquis* of the Customs Union. This Strategy also includes the provision about responsibility of heads of Customs authorities for improving qualifications of Customs officers, thus qualification improvement is treated as the inseparable part of the human resources management.

Lithuanian Customs officer training is based on the principle of systematic training, as well as the principles of learning continuity and financial rationality.

Introductory training and qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers is organized by the Personnel and Training Division of the Customs Department, which meets the requirements to improve officer administrative capacities posed by the top management of the Customs Department and focuses on the needs of the Customs Department units and Customs authorities. Qualification improvement for Customs officers is carried out at several institutions. Lithuanian Institute of Public Administration and the Customs Training Center are the main qualification improvement institutions:

- Lithuanian Institute of Public Administration carries out training and qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers of the highest categories, including EU integration process-related activities, and qualification improvement of Customs officers in certain areas;
- the Customs Training Center carries out the continuous qualification improvement of Customs officers (except the top level officers).

The following are other institutions, in which Customs officer qualification improvement is organized subject to needs:

- the Training Center of the Ministry of Finance;
- the Qualification Improvement Center of Lithuanian University of Law;
- other informal education institutions for adults entitled to organize trainings for civil servants.

Qualification improvement courses and seminars on certain urgent subjects and issues are organized for Customs officers at these institutions.

Institutions participating in qualification improvement process for Lithuanian Customs officers ensure good quality of training and curriculum diversity determined by social, economic and cultural changes. Thus, reacting to trainee needs, 50 curricula of various sizes were developed by the Customs Training Center only in 2003. To ensure training quality, curricula are drafted according to the uniform requirements for curriculum content determined by the Minister of Interior of the Republic of Lithuania. The very meeting of these requirements enables avoiding fragmentation of provided knowledge and allows covering the whole spectrum of urgent knowledge and skills necessary to improve the quality of the administrative capacities.

The proposed variety of training techniques and methods is another aspect of the training quality assurance and implementation of continuity, financial rationality and systematic training principles. The Customs Training Center, with respect to the qualification improvement needs and potential for the Customs officers proposes even several forms of qualification improvement:

- traditional (in-class) qualification improvement at the Customs Training Center;
- traditional (in-class) on-the-job qualification improvement (at a territorial Customs Office);
- distant qualification improvement.

Several types of the traditional (in-class) qualification improvement are available:

- 3-5 day systematic qualification improvement courses for Customs officers with a wide problem coverage;
- 1-2 day qualification improvement seminars for analyzing a specific problem;
- intense computer literacy courses;
- intense foreign language training courses (5 working days);
- continuous foreign language training courses twice per week, 2 acad. hrs. per day, at time convenient for trainees.

The above variety in the arrangement form of qualification improvement courses allows for flexible training, optimally adapted to trainee needs and possibilities. Moreover, it allows covering the wide range of problems and training groups, in turn ensuring that the principles of systematic training and training continuity are realized. The possibility to choose the location of training – the Customs Training Center, a territorial Customs office or the distant on-the-job training, besides other things, enables to use financial resources allocated to training with maximum effectiveness.

Chapter 3. Distant training in qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers

Distant training is presented in the following aspects:

- peculiarities of and opportunities provided by e-training and distant training;
- distant training prospects aiming for the uniform EU standards in Customs officer training;
- distant training development prospects and problems in qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers.

With respect to nowadays topicalities, distant training as the most developed computerized training form is worth having special focus. Computerized training encourages use of the most advanced computer technologies for the training process, starting with *Power point* presentation of visual aids up to development and use of computerized modules for independent studies.

The life-long learning concept stresses the constant need to refresh ones knowledge and skills. And attention needs to be paid to the fact that constant independent learning requires a respective interest. On the basis of the instrumental interest formation theory by Mr. Kregždė (1981), interest status may be grouped into interest unavailability and three interest levels:

- consumer (episodic) interest;
- action (stable) interest;
- self-education interest.

On the level of the consumer interest, the pleasure and excitement of activity plays a special role. Upon transition to the action level, the full interest in the activity develops, the activity seems important to the student. On the self-education level the activity starts bonding with the student's plans and ambitions. In this case it would be the aim to improve oneself and pursue professional heights. Action interest is needed to for the full involvement into the independent professional improvement activity. But, upon realistic situation assessment, there may be doubts about such interest on behalf of practitioner staff. As informal surveys show, it is hard to talk about self-education level interest of Customs officers in the area of qualification improvement.

Thus, the insufficient student activeness and interest are the key obstacles for implementing the life-long learning concept and for encouraging independent studies. However, text structure and visualization possibilities provided by computer applications allow making independent study modules attractive.

Opposite to computerized training, distant training allows ensuring student-instructor (lecturer) contacts, and thus makes this training somewhat closer to traditional seminars in this respect. But opposite to the traditional (in-class) training, Internet access to distant training course material allows working with it at any place and at any convenient time. Thus traditional training-specific time and space constraints are minimized. In addition, compared to traditional in-class qualification improvement courses and seminars, this training becomes more individualized. The student may independently plan his/her work and leisure mode, and, moreover, the rhythm of training material studies.

Unlike students of higher educational institutions provided with new materials, students of qualification improvement courses have slightly different personal level knowledge and experience. Beside this, issues analyzed at seminars or courses differ in urgency to various students, subject to the nature of functions performed and problems faced. Therefore, the possibility of working with the material presented individually and independently of others allows going deeper into challenges urgent to the student. The possibility of e-mail consulting with the instructor (lecturer) is the security for the student that he/she will not be left at the mercy of fortune and will get answers to his/her questions, if no answers were identified in the training material.

A special attention to distant training, as a promising qualification improvement trend, is focused by the World Customs Organization implementing a separate e-training program. Within the framework of this program distant training courses on the most urgent subjects (the English language) are prepared, accessible to all member-countries.

The Directorate General for Taxation and Customs Union (DG TAXUD) of the European Commission also gives a major focus on computerized and distant training. It is the computerized and distant training, which are treated as a chance to unify training standards in EU Member States. The current training program carried out by the Training Policy and Management Division of DG TAXUD ensures movement in this direction. This program aims to develop the virtual Customs Academy consisting of 4 units, namely:

- training material data base, including the training material register of customs training centers in all EU Member States;
- training course data base;
- web-based training course (or distant training course) data base, with links to distant training courses provided in the EU Member States;
- e-training expert forum and chat room about customs officer training priority areas.

Currently the uniform training material data base is under development, and preparations are made for development of training course and distant training course data bases.

This tendency corresponds the theoretical ideas of Anderson (2002). He identifies the following steps in the process of the implementation of information technologies :

- introductory stage (people become acquainted with the new information technologies, but the educational process remains the traditional, i.e. teacher remains as a central figure);
- application stage (computer technologies are applied in the management, but the educational process remains the traditional);
- inspiration stage (computer technologies are used in the educational process) ;

- transformation stage (real organizational alternation).

As demonstrated by studies done by the Project Group of the Training Material and Training Course Data Base, DG TAXUD, many EU countries either currently introduce distant training or are in the final preparatory stages for introduction.

Judged by experience of distant training for qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers, technical problems are faced in the process of introducing this training type, rather than psychological problems or the ones with student resistance against the new training form.

Taking into account the possibility to make the distant training course content (and the form in part) as close as possible to the traditional (in-class) seminars, distant training courses on all issues urgent to Customs officers, and especially to Customs Post officers, are going to be prepared. Though in autumn 2003 – spring 2004 the entire seminar cycle on Customs officer training on EU legislation was developed and conducted, and we believe these problems will remain urgent in the short term.

Experience demonstrates that the Internet access possibility to distant training course material at one's workplace enables to both review selected training materials when facing a problem, and to directly relate the new theory with practice.

On the other hand, giving account to the developments in EU countries and DG TAXUD position, distant training introduction and development is unavoidable to make training of Lithuanian Customs officers closer to the developing EU standards.

Conclusions

For conclusion we may state that:

- distant training must become the inseparable part of the system of qualification improvement of Lithuanian Customs officers;
- distant training will not replace the traditional training and just supplement the latter and enable making of qualification improvement still better responsive to the principles of systematic and continuous training and financial rationality;
- distant training is the real possibility and tool to strive for the uniform EU standards in Customs Officer training.

References

Anderson J., Weert T. at. Al. (eds.) (2002) *Information and Communication Technology in Education*. Paris: UNESCO.

Lietuvos Respublikos tarnybos Lietuvos Respublikos muitinėje statuto pakeitimo įstatymas // Žin., 2000, Nr. 94-2917; 2002, Nr. 45-1705.

Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybės nutarimas Dėl valstybės tarnautojų mokymo 2002-2006 metų strategijos patvirtinimo // Žin., 2002, Nr. 71-2981.

Lietuvos respublikos Vidaus reikalų ministro įsakymas Dėl Valstybės tarnautojų mokymo programų turinio reikalavimų patvirtinimo // Žin., 2002, Nr. 77-3310.

Крягжде Сигитас (1981) *Психология формирования профессиональных интересов*. Вильнюс: Мокслас.