

## Thinking Space No.29

# Persuasion Principles in a NEET context

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**This Thinking Space Paper describes how coaches can use the six principles of persuasion, developed by Robert Cialdini, Professor Emeritus of Psychology and Marketing. The paper gives clues on how to influence the decision-making process of beneficiaries leading to an improved cooperation for of labour market integration.**

Back in 1984, Robert B. Cialdini published a book called “Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion”<sup>1</sup>. In the book, Cialdini describes “Six principles of influence” that persuade people to consent to the request of others. His research on the human decision-making process revealed that people do not consider all available information. In an increasingly complex world with the digitization of massive amounts of information, people need to use shortcuts to guide their thinking and decision-making process.

In his initial work, Robert Cialdini identified the following six shortcuts<sup>2</sup>, which he declares to be universal in terms of human behaviour and decision-making:

1. Reciprocity
2. Scarcity
3. Authority
4. Consistency
5. Liking
6. Consensus

Over the last decades, the book has turned into a seminal book on marketing and conversion rates, even though the principles can be applied to any kind of decision-making process. In the following, we use Robert Cialdini’s principles and apply them to the context of coaches working with NEETS. The idea is not to influence NEETs to do things they are not willing or able to do, but rather to find ways to communicate that might help them to go the extra mile to obtain the job interview they have been longing for. Moreover, the six principles could be taught to the NEETs as part of their soft-skill training. Teaching them how to influence the decision-making process of others or how to be more relatable could be useful in job interviews. Nevertheless, it is also important for the NEETs to understand that job applications are not only about persuasion principles. The young person needs to be authentic; getting a job is like matching, the organisation/company and its culture need to fit as well.

Let’s take a closer look at each of the six principles in a NEETs context:

### 1. Reciprocity

The first principle Reciprocity means that people are obliged to return to others what they have received (this could be in form of gifts, favours or behaviour). For example, you are invited to a friend’s birthday party.

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<sup>1</sup> “Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion”, Roberto Caldini (1984)

<sup>2</sup> In 2016, Robert Cialdini proposed a seventh principle called the unity principle. Nevertheless, this paper only uses the initial six persuasion principles.

You will feel obliged to return the invitation. If a neighbour does you a favour, you kind of feel obliged to return the favour. Robert Cialdini argues that people are more willing to say “yes” to someone they owe (social obligation).

In the context of NEETs, this could be small gestures to make the NEETs more willing to work on difficult topics such as preparing for job interviews or having a difficult conversation. One of the KIZ coaches welcomes the beneficiary in their first meeting with the words: “I know Monday mornings are hard. That’s why the first coffee is on me.” Other coaches give their beneficiaries an application folder with a personal and hand-written sticky note on top of it. With little attentions, gestures or favours, the coaches make the program beneficiaries more willing to say “yes” to future tasks they might ask them to do, just because they feel the social obligation to do so.

Important to note: In order to get the desired persuasion effect, the favour should be useful, individual and unexpected for the one who receives it.

## **2. Scarcity**

People desire things that are scarce. This principle might sound familiar to those who watch teleshopping or travel with low-cost airlines. The selling strategy uses the scarcity principle in the human decision-making process by telling customers that the desired product or flight ticket is running short. The customer needs to quickly make a decision to buy in order to not lose the desired product/service to someone else.

NEETs could be attracted to popular courses or positions with seemingly insufficient places. Thus, the concept of scarcity can be used to help NEETS to pursue a challenging application while emphasizing other job opportunities. This strategy needs to be used wisely and only if the USP of the NEET and the job market allows doing so.

Scarcity always needs to be put in the context of a time restriction to accelerate the decision-making process.

## **3. Authority**

The third principle is the idea that people follow credible and knowledgeable leaders. Fitness trainers, for example, are able to persuade more of their clients to comply with recommended exercise and diet if they themselves look trained and in shape. Doctors increase their credibility if they place their diplomas on the wall of their consulting rooms. People are more likely to follow the orders of a complete stranger in a police uniform than of someone who wears a casual outfit. This principle tells us that it is important to signal the other person why you are a credible person before you start influencing them. It also works if others state that you are a knowledgeable expert.

In the context of NEETs, coaches should start by presenting themselves, their experience with the specific target group as well as their expectations. If the objective is to help young people to start their own businesses, it is helpful to speak about own entrepreneurial experience. If the coaches work with single-mothers with the objective to re-integrate them into the labour market, a female coach who has children too is likely to be more convincing and also functions as a role model.

## **4. Consistency**

Robert Cialdini found that people want to be consistent with the things they have said or done before. If you, for example, told some of your friends that you wanted to lose weight and they invite you for a Sunday

morning workout the following week, it will be much harder for you to say no because of your desire to be consistent.

With regard to the coaching of NEETs, the consistency principle can be triggered by looking for small initial commitments. For example, a NEET does not feel motivated to do some final edits on the CV. For the coach, these edits are important to increase the possibility to obtain a job interview. To activate the NEET, the coach could ask a series of small closed questions: "Do you want that the application is successful?" With a high probability, the NEET will answer with "yes", because the aim is to get a job at the end of the program – but the answer also forces the NEET to be consistent with the follow-up question: "Do you want to do some final changes in your CV to make it more convincing?" The probability that the NEET answers with "yes" is now significantly higher than before.

## 5. Liking

People prefer to say "yes" to those that they like. According to Robert Cialdini there are three important factors when it comes to the persuasion of being liked: We like people who are similar to us, we like people who give us compliments and we like people who work on similar goals.

Coaches who want to harness the power of liking need to look for areas of similarity that they share with the NEETs. For instance, this could be by dressing similar to the way the NEETs do. However, this should fit the style of the coach and look genuine. If perceived as a disguise by the NEETs it might have the contrary effect. Similarity can also mean that coaches once were in a similar situation. Coaches who work with unemployed can make themselves relatable by sharing their own story of being unemployed - they know exactly how it feels. Compliments are used in different ways but they must be genuine and not too general. KIZ coaches for example compliment a beneficiary after a participation in a training. Compliments can also be directed to a first CV draft, an application letter or a job-vision-board. When it comes to working on similar goals, the most obvious tool for the coach is to emphasise the joint objective in finding a job, education or placement that the NEET has chosen.

## 6. Consensus

The last principle is consensus. Often people look at the behaviour of others to determine their own. Robert Cialdini's research found that the small cards in hotel bathrooms saying "Please reuse towels and linens to protect the environment" become significantly more powerful if the wording is altered to: "75% of our guests reuse towels and linens to protect the environment." People like to justify their own behaviour with the behaviour of others.

Consensus is a powerful tool to keep in mind while working with NEETs. According to experienced KIZ coaches, peer pressure in a group is often the reason why early school leavers finally start to change their behaviour. The more people in a group start achieving their goals, the more important it becomes for the rest of the group to do so as well and their behaviour changes accordingly.

To sum up, we hope that this paper becomes a source of inspiration for coaches in their daily work with NEETs. The six principles of persuasion are a guideline to communicate with NEETs in a more efficient. They are useful tools to accomplish the final goal of labour market re-integration. Making yourself more relatable, liked and trustworthy is an important pillar to establish trustful relationships and allows for a goal oriented but also open-minded relationship with the NEETs. Moreover, coaches can use the six persuasion

principles as part of their soft skill or communication trainings. Here, the NEETs can learn how to use the principles to their advantage, e.g. in job interviews. Still, this should not be the only way of use for them: The essence of the persuasion principles is to be able to relate to others and be more emphatic. This is especially useful in difficult conversations or personal conflicts, which prevent NEETs reaching professional goals.