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Learning foreign languages in companies that provide in-house vocational training – Exemplary strategies

The importance of "Europeanizing" vocational training – and concomitantly the need to teach foreign languages on an occupation-related basis – has grown significantly in recent years. The work programme that was formulated on the basis of the Lisbon strategy and approved by the EU education ministers and the European Commission back in 2002 cites the promotion of foreign language learning as one of the 13 key objectives that European education policy is to implement by the year 2010.ⁱ The European Commission's Language Action Plan that was adopted in the summer of 2003 calls for, *inter alia*, workers to have the "opportunity to improve the language skills relevant to their working life".ⁱⁱ This issue is playing an increasingly important role at national level as well. Long gone are the days when only company managers had to be able to operate in contexts involving a foreign language. As economic relations are becoming increasingly internationalized, more and more employees – not only at international corporations but at smaller companies as well – have to be able to understand technical texts and manuals in foreign languages, correspond in a foreign language with parent companies, subsidiaries and associated firms in other countries, and procure important information from Internet pages that are often available only in English.ⁱⁱⁱ

Activities aimed at further developing skilled occupations are responding to these demands by, *inter alia*, incorporating foreign language skills into the training regulations for the respective occupation. But how are the necessary skills to be learned when the additional time this requires is not available – in either the day-to-day routine at the company providing practical training or in the classroom at vocational school? The following sections outlines various strategies that are already being practiced with success today:

1. Transnational practice firms and learning groups

Many companies have already used the practice firm concept successfully as part of their training activities. Thanks to the responsibility assigned them, trainees acquire important basic skills such as autonomy, organizational ability and negotiating skill. Some firms are already operating on a cross-company basis in this connection and are using the means offered by new media such as e-mail, Internet-based discussion fora and complex virtual learning environments. This also expands trainees' "web skills" (Borch/Wordelmann) more or less as a side-effect. However very few companies pursue such activities on an international level – by, for example, having the practice firm handle orders from foreign business partners or bringing their practice firm together with a similar group in another country. In those cases where this does happen, participants see a marked improvement not only in the skills mentioned above but also in their foreign language skills and intercultural knowledge.

Vocational schools are making increasing use of the potential that cross-(language-)border collaboration offers. However many companies that provide in-house vocational training are still hesitant to take the leap – despite the fact that it would be possible in some cases to obtain EU funding (as a Comenius language project).

The EU database of projects that have been awarded the European Language Seal offers various examples of learning groups that have been organized on a cross-border basis. In the area of practice firms, the homepage of the Deutscher Übungsfirmenring (German Practice Firm Circle) offers general information on practice firms, assistance and a link to the European network of central administrative offices for practice firms.

2. Cross-border mobility

Stays abroad during or after vocational training are the best means for acquiring not only foreign language competency but also a knowledge of the work cultures in other countries. At national level, the draft bill to reform vocational training in Germany that was submitted in the spring of 2004 (*Berufsbildungsreformgesetz* – BerBiRefG) contains provisions that would make it considerably easier to complete training segments abroad in the future.^{iv} The European Commission is also planning to increase its expenditure on the promotion of mobility substantially starting in 2007.

The European Commission already provides financial support – through the Leonardo da Vinci programme – for placements abroad or company exchanges lasting up to 12 months (a maximum of six weeks for trainers). Some 30,000 employees in German companies have benefited from these grants in the years since 2000. In this case, participants acquire foreign language competency – usually following a preparatory language course – in a situation in which specific activities in actual working situations are used as a learning platform, a method that noticeably improves learning outcomes. The experience of living and working abroad also helps individuals overcome any inhibitions about functioning in a foreign language. Participating companies can also benefit from mobility activities in a number of ways. The skills that their employees acquire in other countries make it easier to expand their business contacts to international level and the "neutral" view that foreign colleagues have often leads to improvements in one's own internal processes. And finally, involvement in European-level education activities enhances a company's image.

The project databases for the EU's individual education programmes contain a wide variety of examples for activities in the mobility field. They also help firms establish contact with partner companies and inform them about learning materials that are available for different target languages and sectors.

3. Cross-border training cooperation

Collaborative transnational training activities constitute an intensification of "classic" mobility measures, so to speak. In this case, firms from several countries agree on set training segments that are to be completed in different countries. The respective national experience with collaborative training can be incorporated here. It must however be remembered that training structures and practice vary from country to country and the German situation cannot always be directly applied to other countries. Compared to conventional measures, this strategy offers the advantage that valuable training time is not "lost" as a result of stays abroad. And thanks to the longer-term and more intensive collaboration, a marked improvement in participants' foreign language skills and intercultural knowledge can be expected – along with the above mentioned benefits for their companies. For companies located near a national border, such activities involve comparatively little cost or effort. Suggestions

and examples can be found in, for example, the Netzwerk Grenzregion (Border Region Network) database that was set up as part of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research's RegioKompetenzAusbildung campaign ("regiokom" campaign to build skills in particular regions) which is supervised by the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training ("BIBB"). In addition, transnational collaborative training is currently a focal area for Germany in connection with the Leonardo mobility programme.

Generally speaking, in all these activities it is advisable to avoid using only the "hub" language English for cross-border contacts. It is impossible to imagine the business sector without English as its *lingua franca*. In this area English fulfils an important function. However, a basic knowledge of a business partner's technical and day-to-day language brings unquestionable benefits: On the one hand, this knowledge increases understanding of an unfamiliar (work) culture. On the other hand, it has a positive impact on building trust between the parties involved.

4. Learning that integrates content and language

Not every company can support its employees' acquisition of foreign language competency in this way. Content and language integrated learning (CLIL) offers an alternative in such cases. With this instruction method, part of the subject content is taught in a foreign language (five to ten percent of instruction time). CLIL has already proven its worth in many schools that provide a general education. In the vocational training field, company-related or company-specific texts in a foreign language could be used during classroom instruction at vocational school or reproduced in authentic situations. Correspondingly, what the individual has already learned should be reinforced in the respective foreign language as far as possible during practical in-company training. The advantages of this method: It doesn't require any additional lessons and the foreign language is taught using an activity-based approach with direct links to everyday occupational life. The findings from the BILVOC Leonardo project, for example, could be of assistance when making the necessary arrangements with vocational schools and selecting instruction materials. A wide range of materials for "bilingual instruction" are currently being developed and corresponding continuing training concepts for trainers are being tested under the supervision of the Thuringian Ministry of Education and the Arts. Information on this

and other Leonardo projects involving occupation-related language instruction is available in the Leonardo programme databases under the keyword "Language training".

The growing importance of foreign language competency also poses new challenges for instruction and training personnel. Transnational practice firms must be provided flanking support, virtual learning environments must be moderated and subject instruction must be conducted in a foreign language. Mobility measures are of use only when they are carefully prepared and then followed up on. This opens up opportunities for training personnel to expand their own skills. Those responsible for human resources in companies providing in-house training can support this process by, for example, providing corresponding continuing training activities (and granting training personnel leave from regular duties to participate in them).

Even in smaller companies, the internationalization of business relations is in full swing. Those companies that ensure at an early stage that they have corresponding skills in-house will have an advantage here. Foreign language skills are of great importance in this connection.

Useful links

www.na-bibb.de (National Agency Education for Europe, at BIBB)

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/language/label/index.cfm> (European Label database)

www.zuef.de (Deutscher Übungsfirmenring = German Practice Firm Circle)

www.wege-ins-ausland.de (central website for funding sources for mobility activities)

<http://Leonardo.cec.eu.int/pdb/> (European Compendium & Products Database)

<http://Leonardo.cec.eu.int/psd/> (European Partner Search Database)

www.Leonardodavinci-projekte.org (German-Austrian project and product database)

www.regiokom.de/nw_grenzregion/index.htm (Netzwerk Grenzregion – Border Region Network)

www.Leonardo.th.schule.de/ (BILVOC project)

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- i. Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of Education and training systems in Europe, COM 2002/C 142/01
 - ii. Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity: An Action Plan 2004 – 2006, COM (1003) 449 final, p. 9
 - iii. For more on the subject of international qualifications, please see H. Borch and Dr. Peter Wordelmann: *Internationalisierung des dualen Systems – Strategien und Forderungen* in: BWP offprint from issue 4/2001, p. 5-10.
 - iv. Part 1, Section 2, Para. 2 "Parts of vocational training may be completed abroad when this serves the training objectives. The aggregate duration of such segments shall not exceed one fourth of the total period of training stipulated in the training regulations."