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SIEHReQ - Sociological Institution Theories to Explain Company Decisions & Actions in Recruitment and Qualification

Development Project: Abstract

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The project "Company Practices and Decisions on Qualification, Competence Development and Recruitment of Skilled Workers: Exploring and Operationalizing Sociological Institutional Theories" (SIEHReQ for short) is a development project of the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training in the thematic cluster "Company Decisions and Actions - Factors Influencing Company Qualification and Recruitment".

Recent approaches in social science theories of institutions, organisations and practices provide theoretical concepts of high value to company-based VET research but with only little use so far. These theoretical concepts have the potential to link institutionalist and actor-centred perspectives for the study of company decision-making and action in the areas of training, competence development and skilled worker recruitment. The project aims to make the approaches for company-based VET research accessible and to contribute to a better understanding of the strategies and practices companies use to meet their qualification and competence requirements. In addition, data from the BIBB Company Panel on Qualification and Competence Development (BIBB Qualification Panel) will be analysed based on organisational and institutional theory. Furthermore, the projects seeks to further develop and implement analytical options into the panel study.

Project Description

How do companies align the decisions and actions they take in the areas of training, staff planning and staff development with the professional competencies required? Which stakeholders influence these processes and what scope for action do they have? Which institutional influences from the corporate environment shape patterns of behaviour at an operational level? Questions such as these are central to the project addressing how companies meet their training, competence and qualification requirements.

The project aims: 1) to broaden the theoretical conceptual framework for investigating training and competence development requirements in companies.

2) To analyse empirical data from the BIBB Establishment Panel on Qualification and Competence Development in order to consider, in their systematic relation, the relevant fields of activity for meeting company training and competence requirements such as initial and continuing vocational education and training, competence development and personnel recruitment.

The background to these aims is a series of conceptual shortcomings in company-based VET research studies. For example, empirical analyses are often limited to individual fields of activity of competence and qualification development within a company such as initial education and training, continuing education and training or skilled worker recruitment. Other fields of activity like work-based informal learning, skills and competence management practices and networking between companies are often not sufficiently involved in the studies. Additionally, research studies often neglect to find systematic interrelationships between these fields of activity and their relation to overarching strategic decision-making. Consequently, it is not possible to investigate adequately the basis for a range of different decisions and the courses of action open to actors in the development and implementation of new institutional structures or in the rejection of existing institutional practices.

Overall, company-based VET research often lacks to consider reciprocal relationships between three levels of investigation, which determine company-based activities in the

areas of qualification, and competence development. These are the actors' level, organisational level and institutional level. First, actors are individuals or corporate actors with adequate resources, e.g. at executive and management level, training and personnel managers at operational level, and actors such as staff representatives and skilled workers tasked with organising and supporting internal learning in both formal and informal contexts. In turn, these actors or corporate actors e.g. networks, in each case, are embedded in their thinking, attitudes, actions and decision-making in institutionally and organisationally enshrined norms and company-based standards. They also, however, play a role in creating, shaping and formulating institutional frameworks consisting of rules, norms, cultures, practices in the area of competence and qualification development.

Second, the company or organisational level differentiates between different forms of company and work organisation and the distinctive fields of activity in the company that relate to competence and qualification development. Examples include functional line organisations compared to matrix, network and agile organisational forms. This includes related hierarchies, forms of monitoring and control, personnel policies and work organisation, as well as the specific practices in each case for meeting the training and competence requirements. Differing company and organisational forms are also an expression of generally legitimised and socially institutionalised beliefs. As such, they are institutions of managing and decision-making. They themselves are key collective, influential corporate actors and networks subject to constant change due to the altering practices of organisations.

Third, as an overarching and interrelated level, several institutions are responsible for company action and decision-making in the operational context, e.g. recruiting traditions; and in the extra-company context normative commitment to the occupational concept and to socially generally accepted and legally prescribed norms. However, this also includes the commitment to external institutions such as collective bargaining coverage and alignment with specific local and regionally educational institutions and employment markets. These kind of institutions are also subject to permanent change despite being comparatively more stable.

The recent approaches in institutional and organisational theories provide scope for combining institutional and agency centred perspectives relating to the investigation of company decision-making and actions in the areas of training, competence development and skilled worker recruitment. Taking advantage of these concepts, the project focuses on companies' practices and decisions on vocational and educational training (VET) and competence development. Central targets are (1) competence management strategies, practices, and their effects for different employees and (2) the role of in-company actors and agency within different processes to innovate, implement and change strategies and practices of vocational training and competence development.

We use data from the BIBB Establishment Panel on Qualification and Competence Development to conduct analyses with base on concepts from organisational and institutional theories. Data is available for this purpose from an average of 4,000 German firms with employees subject to social insurance contributions and relating to the company-based fields of activity described above. Research papers focus initially on analyses of interrelationships between certain fields of activity and their connection with company-based competency management and effects on target groups. A further paper will address company-based decision-making networks for individual fields of activity. Empirical methods like cluster analyses are used for working out differences in company-based competence and qualifications development activity over time and in relation to company-specific decision-

making structures. In medium term, we intend as well to use qualitative research methods in order to explore agency structures and the institutional work of different actors within companies.

