Sustainability in vocational education and training in commercial occupations – why exactly?

Commercial occupational activity takes place in an extremely dynamic environment. Those involved in the commercial sector must be able to rapidly respond to technological innovations, changing consumer demands and new social requirements to ensure their competitiveness. In professional work, one cannot react to external changes, but must be proactive by anticipating new trends and discovering new methods to accommodate them.

The specialist work they perform plays a crucial part in determining how we will live in future. How can customer needs best be met? How should products be brought to the market, whose production consumes fewest resources and complies with societal standards? How will products reach their destination via the most energy-efficient means of transport? To find sustainable solutions, specific professionals skills are required, which may be fostered by continuous vocational education and training.

A number of sustainability trends and required skills for selected commercial occupations are listed below. The information presented is based on the results of pilot projects carried out within the scope of the funding focus “Vocational education and training for sustainable development 2015–2019” (Funding Line I) and its scientific supervision (University of Hamburg, Institute for Vocational and Business Education).

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Latest information on vocational education and training for sustainable development:

- www.bbne.de
- Sustainability in training practice:
  www.foraus.de/bbne

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Retail

Customers want less packaging waste
- Develop strategies to minimise packaging
- Evaluate different packaging solutions with regard to recyclability
- Be aware of alternatives to plastic packaging and offer them in a targeted way

The number of quality and sustainability labels is rapidly increasing
- Know the criteria used to award different labelling
- Assess and compare labels in terms of quality and credibility
- When providing customer advice, steer them to high quality and sustainable labelling

Demand for fair trade products is rising
- Obtain and evaluate information about the conditions under which products are manufactured
- Consider fair trade criteria when developing product range
- Advise customers on the social and ecological standards of products

Wholesale and foreign trade

The ecological and economic costs of freight transport are increasing
- Contribute to the conservation of resources by optimising route planning
- Take into account the economic and ecological aspects in supply chain management
- Deploy reusable transport containers

Expectations for companies to assume corporate social responsibility (CSR) with the knowledge that sustainability reporting is rising
- Be aware of the criteria contained in CSR guidelines and of sustainability reporting
- Explain societal responsibility of your company
- Develop sustainable guiding principles for the company and commit to their implementation

Cases about socially intolerable production conditions are often reported in the media
- Ensure producers comply with social and environmental standards
- Include ecological and social guidelines on balance sheets
- Conclude agreements with suppliers stating the ecological and social impact of goods ordered

Forwarding and logistics services

Globalisation of trade leads to an increase in traffic flow and resource consumption
- Evaluate different means of transport with consideration of their resource consumption
- Take into account the economic and ecological impact by combining different means of transport such as aeroplanes, ships, rail, lorries, carrier bicycles, etc.

Environmental zones are being established in an increasing number of city centres
- Minimise pollution by selecting low-emission sources of transport
- Seek to identify (more) sustainable options, e.g. for the “last mile”

New time- and resource-saving technologies are being tested in the transport sector
- Be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of innovative transport technologies (e.g. autonomous vehicles)
- Investigate the use of robots in warehouse logistics procedures
- Find out about current trial methods for goods delivery (e.g. via drone)

Competencies

Trends towards sustainability are becoming increasingly visible, particularly in commercial occupations, requiring new competencies from all employees. The areas of potential, which already exist within respective occupations, may be used during the process. Related professions may provide further ideas. For more detailed information, please visit www.bbne.de