

# **Training Networks in VET as Innovative Concepts – Reasons and Boundaries for Training Companies to Participate**

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**Abstract:** During the past decade vocational education policy has been furthering training networks. Enterprises which are too small or too specialised to offer an apprenticeship place on their own join a network of training companies. The responsibility for recruitment, placement, and formal qualification lies with a professionalised lead organisation. During their apprenticeship, the apprentices switch their training company on a (half-)yearly rotational basis. Based on a case study of four training networks in Switzerland the aim of this paper is to understand the reasons for the slow and hesitant institutionalisation of this new organisational form of VET that has high potential for improving quality of VET, for creating additional apprenticeship places and for integration socially disadvantaged youth into post-compulsory education.

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## 1 Introduction

During the past decade vocational education policy in Switzerland as well as in other countries like Germany, Austria or Norway has been furthering training networks or training circles<sup>1</sup> as an alternative location for the placement of vocational training opportunities in the dual VET system (for Austria: Lachmayr and Dornmayr, for Germany: Schlottau, 2003; 2008; for Norway: Michelsen and Høst, 2004; for Switzerland: BBT, 2008). This policy is a reaction to changes in the training conditions of companies due to rising requirements on flexibility, implementation of new technology, the rationalisation of production processes or the outsourcing of parts of production or services (Walther and Renold, 2005).

Based on a case study of four training networks in Switzerland the aim of this paper is to understand the reasons for the slow and hesitant institutionalisation of this new organisational form of VET that has high potential for improving quality of VET, for creating additional apprenticeship places and for integration socially disadvantaged youth into post-compulsory education.

## 2 Training Networks

Enterprises which are too small or too specialised to offer an apprentice a training-programme on their own can form a training network with other enterprises to cover all the elements in the training plan (Figure 1). A so called lead organisation recruits on the one hand training companies that are willing to join the network and that are able to train apprentices on a good quality level. Members of this organisation support the training companies in administration and training and in situations of problems that arise with the apprentices.

On the other hand the lead organisation recruits the apprentices, draws up the training contract with them and places them on a (half-)yearly rotational basis in the training companies. The responsibility for formal qualification lies with this lead organisation. With this, the training companies pass responsibility for the apprenticeship over to the lead organisation, but pay the salary of the apprentices and the service of the lead organisation.

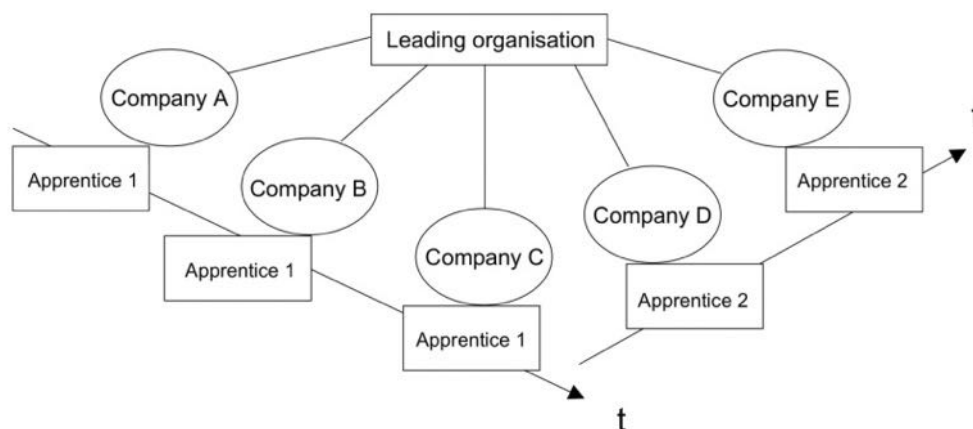


Figure 1: Structure of a Swiss training network and the rotation of apprentices

## 3 Potential of training networks

The furthering of shared training particularly of small and medium-sized companies (SME) can serve on the one hand the public good of creating additional apprenticeship opportunities and of fostering

<sup>1</sup> Germany: Verbundausbildung; Austria: Ausbildungsverbände; Norway: Local Training Agencies; Switzerland: Lehrbetriebsverbände.

the integration of socially disadvantaged youth into the employment market (Imdorf and Leemann, 2012). On the other hand, this new educational form can help improving the quality of VET in SME because it gives apprentices insights in different field of branch activities (Leemann and Birr, 2015) and fosters competencies of flexibility and mobility with the apprentices (Leemann and Sagelsdorff, 2014).

Shared training by means of these networks could also have many advantages for the training companies. The leading organisation possesses the resources (time, tools, and qualified personal) for a professional recruitment of apprentices and assists the training companies significantly in providing the training services, in supervising the apprentices and supporting them in difficult situations that could lead to an interruption of the apprenticeship. It coaches the professional trainers in the training companies when new regulations in the VET-system are introduced. The training companies are freed from the responsibility for the apprenticeships themselves. If ever serious problems occurred with apprentices the lead organisation is accountable for their relocation.

#### **4 Impediments in running a training network**

Nevertheless, we can also imagine disadvantages for the training companies and problematic constellations of such a training network that could hinder training companies to join a training network or that could lead to a withdrawal from the training network. One reason could be the payment for the lead organisation in cases where training companies are not satisfied by the services of it. Another reason could be found in the rotation principle because firms have to introduce new apprentices into the company culture, operational sequences and array of products again and again and lose the well instructed and familiarised ones every (half-)year. Not least competition between the training companies becomes reality when they fear that business secrets are passed over or that they lose the good apprentices as future employees.

#### **5 Aim of the paper**

Although the model of training networks is an innovative and promising concept in VET that might support SME in contributing to the VET system, that can improve quality of VET and that has the potential to give access to socially disadvantaged youth to an apprenticeship, the share of training networks in the VET system is rather small and has not been substantially increasing during the last decade.

Unfortunately no statistical data on the number of apprenticeship places in training networks or on the spread of training networks is available. On the basis of an evaluation of the Swiss Federal Office of Vocational Training and Technology (BBT, 2008) and of an own appraisal (internet-enquiry) we estimate that the number of apprenticeships in training networks has increased from 1 percent to 3 percent of all apprenticeship places in the last fifteen years.

The aim of the paper is to understand the reasons for the slow and hesitant institutionalisation of this new organisational form of VET. Therefore we will treat the following two questions: 1) Why companies do join a training network and participate in this form of VET (reasons to participate)? 2) In which situations they express critique and dissatisfaction, call for adjustments and improvement of the organisation of the training network and threaten to withdraw from shared training (boundaries to participate)?

#### **6 Theoretical framework**

To reveal and conceptualise the different competing and conflicting rationalities of training companies in participating in a training network, we refer to the French sociology of convention (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999; Diaz-Bone, 2011). Conventions are collectively established principles of orientation and action (orders of worth) on the basis of which actors evaluate and coordinate in social situations and justify their actions and decisions.

The social world comprises a plurality but finite number of conventions whereby the conventions of market, domestic, civic, industrial, fame, inspiration and project are relevant to understand

the dynamic in training network. To keep the training network running, compromises, i.e. durable agreements, constructed on the basis of different conventions, have to be found (Jagd, 2011).

## 7 Data

The empirical data stems from a case study of four theoretically selected training networks with a mixed method design (Yin, 2009). Two training networks have been established top down by the initiative of a public organisation; the other two training networks have been founded bottom up by the initiative of a professional or branch association.

The paper is based on 36 expert interviews with selected training companies in the four training networks as well as on documents like educational concepts or annual reports.

## 8 Results

The results demonstrate the plurality of rationalities that underlie the motives of training companies for participation in a training network. We find two main motives. On the one hand training companies stress the potential of the rotation system in forming a qualified work force thanks to the experiences that apprentices gain in different fields of the branch and due to the expertise of the lead organisation in training the apprentices (industrial convention). On the other hand, certain training companies refer to the civic convention when explaining their participation by referring to their public responsibility for offering training positions to (socially disadvantaged) youth.

Besides that other and additional motives can be found. For example especially small training companies participate due to the good image and reputation of a training company in the training network or of the training network itself what attract well qualified and motivated youth (convention of fame).

As to the boundaries of participation one problem is the fact that training companies lose the possibility of recruiting the apprentices on their own. Instead they get them assigned in the context of the (half-)yearly rotation and they have to work with "the human material" they receive. As a consequence training companies complain about certain groups of apprentices (e.g. youth with migrant background) who do not fit into the culture of the firm what reflects the agency of the domestic convention.

Critiques about the amount of additional work for introducing every (half a) year new apprentices is a feature of the industrial convention. Critique that relies on the market convention we can observe when training companies are no more willing to pay the "high price" for the apprentices and claim for reduction.

In a training network a mixture of different and sometimes contradictory rationalities is melding and resulting in conflicts so that the lead organisation is challenged to find solutions and compromises to keep the training network running and to prevent a withdrawal of a training company from the training network.

The results on the motives of training companies for participation in training networks help understand the "social glue" which binds the different training companies together into a lively and flexible organisational form. Knowing the boundaries for participation and the dynamics of conflicts and compromises of this complex and unstable organisational form help understand why this innovative concept has problem in gaining a foothold in the VET System. All in all this allow better advice for training networks in acquisition of potential training company and cooperation with training companies.

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