

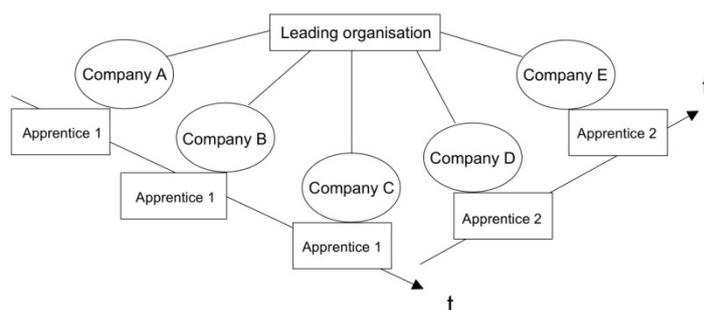
Training Networks in VET as Innovative Concepts – Reasons and Boundaries for Training Companies to Participate

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During the past decade vocational education policy in Switzerland as well as in other countries like Germany or Austria has been furthering *training networks (TN)* or training circles (Germany: Verbundausbildung, Schweiz: Lehrbetriebsverbände) as an alternative location for the placement of vocational training opportunities (1). Enterprises which are too small or too specialised to offer an apprentice a training-programme on their own form a training network with other enterprises to cover all the elements in the training plan. The responsibility for recruitment, placement, and formal qualification lies with a professionalised *lead organization (LO)*. During their apprenticeship, the apprentices switch their training company on a (half-)yearly rotational basis.



The furthering of shared training serves on the one hand the public good of creating additional apprenticeship opportunities and of fostering the integration of youth into the employment market. On the other hand, this new educational form aims at improving the quality of VET and 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.

Shared training by means of these networks has many advantages for the *training companies (TC)*, e.g. the LO possesses the resources (time, tools, qualified personal) for a professional recruitment and assists them significantly in providing the training services and supervising of the apprentices by the LO. The TCs are freed from the responsibility for the apprenticeships themselves. If ever serious problems occurred with apprentices the LO is accountable for their relocation.

Nevertheless, there are also disadvantages for the TC and problematic constellations that could hinder training companies to join a TN, e.g costs of the LO or competition between the TC for the future employees.

As a consequence of the rotation principle every (half) year the firms have to introduce new apprentices into the company culture, operational sequences and array of products and lose the well instructed and familiarised ones. Not least competition between the TC becomes reality when they fear that business secrets are passed over or that they lose the good apprentices as future employees. The aim of the paper is to understand why companies join a training network and participate in this form of VET (*reasons to participate*), and in which situations they express critique and dissatisfaction and call for adjustments and improvement of the organisation of the TN (*boundaries to participate*).

To reveal and conceptualise the different competing and conflicting rationalities of TCs in participating in a TN, we refer to the French sociology of convention (2, 3). 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 TN. To keep the TN running, compromises, i.e. durable agreements, constructed on the basis of different conventions, have to be found (4).

The empirical data stems from a case study of four theoretically selected TNs with a mixed method design (5). Two TN have been established top down by the initiative of a public organisation, the other two TN have been founded bottom up by the initiative of a professional or branch association. The paper is based on 36 expert interviews with selected TCs in the four TN as well as on documents like educational concepts or annual reports.

The results demonstrate the plurality of rationalities that underlie the motivation of TCs for participation in a TN. We find two main motives. On the one hand TCs 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 LO in training the apprentices (industrial convention). On the other hand, certain TCs 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 TCs participate due to the good image and reputation of a TC in the TN or of the TN itself what attract well qualified and motivated youth (convention of fame). In a TN a mix of different and sometimes contradictory rationalities is melding and the LO is challenged to find solutions and compromises to keep the TN running and to prevent a withdrawal of a TC from the TN.

As to the boundaries of participation one problem is the fact that TCs 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 TCs 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, critiques based on the market convention we can observe when TCs are no more willing to pay the "high" price for the apprentices and claim for reduction.

These results help understand the motives of TC for participation in TNs and the boundaries that have to be crossed and thus allow better advice for TNs in acquisition of potential TC and cooperation with TC.

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