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Training Networks in VET – Reasons for Training Companies to Participate

Abstract

During the past decade vocational education policy has been furthering *training networks (TN)*. 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.

There exist several advantages for the *training companies (TC)*, e.g. professional recruitment and supervising of the apprentices by the LO, less responsibility in case of problems with trainees. On the other hand, certain disadvantages and problematic constellations of TN could hinder training companies to join a TN (costs of the LO, competition between the TC for the future employees). The aim of the paper is to understand why companies join a training network and participate in this form of VET, in which situations they express critique but remain in the TN, and under what conditions they leave a TN.

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. Conventions are collectively established principles of orientation and action on the basis of which evaluation, coordination, and legitimation of relations and expectations between several actors take place.

The empirical data stems from a case study of four TNs. The paper is based on expert interviews with selected TCs and on an online survey of all TCs of the two larger TNs.

The results demonstrate the plurality of rationalities that underlie the motivation for participation in a TN and the diverse motives for critique that form the "social glue" which binds the different TCs together into a lively and flexible organisational form.

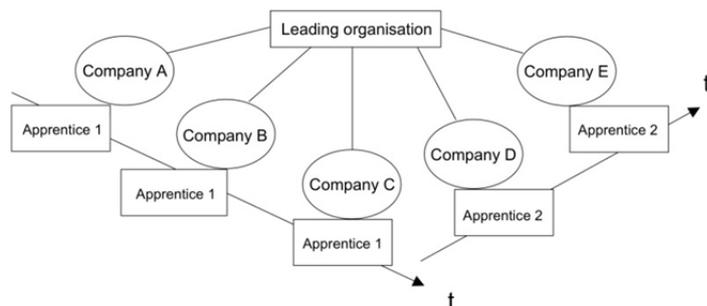
Topic

During the past decade national vocational education policy in many European countries has been furthering so-called *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 vocational training plan. 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.

Main characteristics of training networks

The responsibility for recruitment, selection, employment, placement, supervision and formal qualification lies with a professionalised so-called *lead organization (LO)*. During their apprenticeship, the apprentices switch their training company on a (half-)yearly rotational basis (cf. Figure 1).

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



Advantages and problematic constellations of training networks for training companies

Shared training by means of these networks has many advantages and can be an attractive option for training companies (TC); the LO possesses the resources (time, tools, qualified personal) for a professional recruitment and assists them significantly in providing the training services. The TCs are freed from the responsibility for the apprenticeships themselves. The services of the LO cover the administration of the apprenticeships, the support and monitoring of the TC as well as of the apprentices (including advising and assistance with training problems at part-time vocational school or in the company as well as controlling educational objectives), taking on training assignments. If ever serious problems occurred with apprentices the LO is accountable for their relocation. Moreover the apprentices are going to leave the firm after the rotation period at the latest.

Nevertheless there are also disadvantages for the TC and problematic constellations. Primarily, the TC have to finance – besides the apprentices' wage – all the service and support they receive from the LO. A next critical point is the fact that the 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 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.

Aim

The aim of the paper is to understand against the background of the above mentioned advantages and problematic constellations why companies join a training network and participate in this form of VET, in which situations they are not pleased with certain points of this organisational form, but remain and try to influence the TN towards the desired direction, and under what conditions they leave a TN.

We assume that the motivations of the TC are structured by three dimensions: a) the size of the TC and TN, b) the economic sector (private or state driven) of the TC and TN and c) the industry of the TN (homogeneous or heterogeneous). E.g. the primary focus of a TC in a TN in the private sector with a specific line lies on creating a professional workforce (gaining future employees) whereas governmental TC and/or TNs additionally push the integration of adolescents into the employment market and into society.

Research questions

The aim of the study will be achieved by answering the following three questions:

- (1) What are the reasons that motivate TCs to participate in a TN, to get involved in this new organisational form in VET and to stay even if they encounter difficult constellations?
- (2) Which critiques do TCs express with regard to the experiences in participating in a TN? How do they try to achieve changes? And what are the reasons that lead to a withdrawal from the TN?
- (3) How does the size, the economic sector and the heterogeneity of the industry structure the willingness to participate in a TN as well as influence, critiques and discontent?

Theoretical framework

To reveal and conceptualise the different competing and conflicting rationalities of TCs in participating in a TN and in criticising and/or thinking about leaving the TN, we refer to the so called French sociology of convention (2, 3). Conventions are collectively established principles of orientation and action (orders of worth) on the basis of which evaluation, decision, coordination, and legitimation of relations and expectations between several actors take place. The social world comprises a plurality but finite number of conventions (market, domestic, civic, industrial, fame, inspiration). In specific social situations (like the decision to participate and remain, or to quit actors reflexively refer to these orders of worth, do 'justification work' criticising or justifying particular orders of worth. To keep the organisation (TC as well as TN) running, compromises, i.e. durable agreements, constructed on the basis of different conventions, have to be found (4).

Design of the study

The empirical data stems from a case study of four theoretically selected TNs (5) with a mixed method design. The results of the paper are based on a qualitative and a quantitative approach:

- a. a total of 33 semi-structured expert interviews with selected TCs (data collection finished). The interview as well as the analyses are aligned to the epistemological framework of the sociology of convention, that is asking the interviewees for justification of their decisions and critiques (Why-Questions) respectively looking for justifications in the material.
- b. an online survey of all TCs of the two larger TNs (data collection December 2012/January 2013). The analyses will be predominantly descriptive.

The interviews and survey focus on (amongst others) 1) the reasons and motivations of TCs to participate in TN or to think about quitting them respectively, 2) the positive and negative experiences with this training form in VET (outsourcing of recruiting, rotation, external supervision by the LO) and with the support by the LO.

First results

The results of the qualitative approach demonstrate the plurality of rationalities that underlie the motivation for participation in a TN and the diverse motives for critique that form the "social glue" which binds the different TCs together into a lively and flexible organisational form.

The civic convention is crucial when TCs explain their participation by referring to their public responsibility for offering training positions to youth. We find such argumentations above all in TCs which are partially financed by the state (e.g. public transport) or which are part of the public administration (e.g. institutions in the health and care sector). Complaining about certain groups of apprentices (e.g. youth with migrant background) who do not fit into the culture of the firm 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. The same is true when TCs are delighted with the support of the LO in recruiting and supervising the apprentices and stress how much they are disburdened from these time consuming parts of a training programme. Particularly small TCs profit from these services. In several cases the responsible people are enthusiastic about the idea of the TN itself. They point to the advantages of this form of training for the youth (learning opportunities) as well as for the firm (new inspirations by rotating trainees) and are highly motivated to participate, what demonstrate the significance of the convention of inspiration.

Justifications with regard to the market convention we can observe when TCs are no more willing to pay the "high" price for the apprentices and claim for reduction. Especially small TC are interested in participating in a – regarding the line – homogenous TN when a big and well-known firm with a good reputation is part of the TN too. Due to the good image of the leader firm the TN attracts well qualified youth for their training programme. The profit for the small TC (gaining qualified future employees) is a result of a compromise between the elements of the market convention and the convention of fame.

These results help understand the motives of TC for participation in TNs, the reasons that lead to a withdrawal from the TN as well as the resistances to join a TN at all and thus allow better advice for TNs in acquisition of potential TC and cooperation with TC.

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