

GALVENĀS MĀCĪBU TĒMAS UN TO NOTEIKŠANAS PRINCIPI DARBA VIETĀS LATVIJĀ

Identifying the Training Needs and the Key Training Topics in the Enterprises of Latvia

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Abstract. *The role of a workplace in the provision of lifelong learning processes is increasingly emphasised in the academic discourse. Since the early 21st century, a new term – “workplace pedagogy” (Billet, 2000) – has appeared, which signifies the increasingly important role of the workplace in the process of adult learning. The goal of this article is to discuss the key principles in determining the training needs and the key training topics in the enterprises of Latvia. The author of the article has carried out a qualitative study using a partially structured interview method. Four heads of human resource departments have been interviewed in four enterprises of Latvia with varied capital and with total number of employees reaching more than 6000. The outcomes of the study reveal three key tendencies in determining the training needs. First, the principle of urgency, namely, technical training, in order to ensure that corporate activities are pursued in accordance with law. Second, the principle of professional development for staff. This block contains various training options aimed at the development of the different skills and competences. Third, the training dictated by the development of information technologies. However, it must be noted that it is more characteristic to the enterprises specialised in information and communication technologies and thus could be integrated in the group mentioned in the second group. All the interviewees confirmed that training in the companies they represent is financially supported, although specific amount of expenditure was not mentioned. Still, it is possible to conclude that the planning and implementation of staff training form an integral part of corporate strategies. At the same time, it is possible to draw a conclusion that several crucial skills such as complex problem solving, cross-cultural competency, new media literacy, which have been mentioned as essential in the sources used for this research, have been neglected as staff training options.*

Keywords: *adult education; adult learning; life-long learning; skills for jobs; workplace learning; workplace pedagogy.*

Introduction

The World Economic Forum (WEF) report entitled *The Future of Jobs Report* (2018a) confirms that the speed of change in the labour market has been increasing since 2016, when the World Economic Forum published its initial study on *The Future of Jobs: Employment, Skills and Workforce Strategy for the*

Fourth Industrial Revolution. Furthermore, the gap between skills and competences demanded in the labour market and the capacity of the formal education system to provide opportunities to acquire these skills and competences is growing. For this reason, more and more enterprises are becoming “learning places”, not only by offering, providing and financing, but by integrating training of different types, forms and content into entrepreneurial processes. According to Van Dam and Guidone (2018), in future enterprises are likely to be able to keep the best employees only by developing a “learning culture” that offers employees continuous development opportunities. On the other hand, the growing trend of freelancers in the West, which in 2020 is estimated to reach 50% of the workforce by a number of authors and organisations (Kaufman, 2014), the author of the article herein is nevertheless inclined to think that every adult will be more responsible for developing his/her own skills and expertise and for creating and strengthening his/her own personal “brand” in an increasingly demanding and changing labour market. This is demonstrated by a study published by the WEF in 2018, in which 84% of enterprises admit that they would choose a strategy to recruit new employees to replace the existing ones and only 72% would teach the existing ones to address the issue of skills shortage.

Both the 21st century skills mentioned in the sources analysed in this article and the skills required in the labour market (e.g. persuasion, negotiation skills) fall within the so-called “social competences” category, which cannot be learned in school to the extent required by the labour market. There are also digital skills that cannot be acquired to the extent needed within the framework of the formal education system, for objective reasons such as the rapid development of technologies and artificial intelligence. Therefore, workplaces play an increasingly important role in both informal and formal education system (for example, work-based learning). Otherwise, the enterprise will simply lose its competitiveness and place in the market.

The objectives of this research are:

- 1) whether there are any mechanisms for identifying the training needs in the ever-changing business circumstances, and if there are – what kind of mechanisms;
- 2) what are the key training topics in the workplaces in Latvia.

A qualitative study has been carried out to achieve this aim. The method of semi-structured face-to-face interviews has been used to collect the primary data, and the method of thematic analysis has been applied to the data analysis. HR managers from four large enterprises (each of more than 1000 employees in Latvia) with both foreign and local capital have been interviewed.

Literature review

Comparatively recently, in the late 20th century, training in the enterprise was largely focused on increasing the employees' skills. "The purpose of management training and development is to increase competence by doing a specific job" (Kubr & Prokopenko, 1989, 9). However, the study *The Future of Jobs Report* (WEF, 2018a), as well as previous studies, have shown that in the 21st century training in the workplace should change in terms of the content, too. Trilling and Fadel (2009) divide the skills needed in the 21st century into three categories: learning and innovation skills, digital literacy skills and career and life skills (Trilling & Fadel, 2009), of which: the latter includes skills such as flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social and cross-cultural interaction, productivity and accountability, leadership and responsibility. Social intelligence and cross-cultural competency are also mentioned by Davies, Fidler and Gorbis (2011) in their study *Future Work Skills 2020*. Reports by the WEF in 2016 and 2018 mention emotional intelligence as a necessary skill of the 21st century. From the above, it can be concluded that the understanding of the competency of a modern and competitive employee goes far beyond the definition provided by Kubr and Prokopenko in 1989, namely, to increase the competence to do the work in question. Or, it can be said that the pursuit of a particular job in the 21st century is not merely about professional competency and its increase.

Since 1999, Eurostat has been collecting data on vocational training (*Continuing Vocational Training Survey* (CVTS) up to 2005, *Vocational Education and Training Statistics* by 2005, *Vocational Education and Training Statistics* currently) in the European Union (EU), including statistics on the continuing vocational training in enterprises (*Continuing Vocational Training in Enterprises*). According to the most recent data by Eurostat, most of the vocational training programmes in enterprises are provided outside the formal education system, which is to be classified as non-formal education or training (Eurostat, 2018).

Eurostat data show that the number of enterprises providing further vocational training and development opportunities to their staff has increased by 6.8% in 28 EU countries in 2015 compared to 2010 and by 12.8% compared to 2005. In Latvia, there were 99.9% of such enterprises providing further vocational training and development among those surveyed in 2015. Compared to 2005, this indicator has increased more than twice in Latvia. This increase may be explained by the opportunities and investments offered by the European Structural Funds in the field of adult education, which has continued since 2001 and is available under the *Human Resources and Employment* operational programme in a variety of sub-activities, including promotion of the

competitiveness of economic operators (esfondi.lv). High professional development rates were also found in Norway – 99.1% of enterprises offered further training courses to their employees in 2015, while for example in Greece, this percentage was 21.7%.

Eurostat (2018) distinguishes the training of employees not only by content but also by form. In other words, continuing vocational training means that courses are led separately from the active workplace and the training takes place in a specially designated place (training centre, classroom). The content of the training is adapted to a specific group and internal and external continuing vocational training and development courses are provided. Another method, or other forms of training, are usually related to active work and workplace, but may also include participation in conferences, fairs and the like.

Having analysed the scholarly literature and sources in the context of teaching content and thematic blocks, it can be concluded that there is still no common understanding of the so-called “soft skills”. In Latvian language these essential 21st century skills do not even have a generally accepted translation. In the context of the new training content to be developed in the field of general and vocational education, in the projects funded by the European Structural Funds entitled *The Approach of Competences in the Learning Content* and *Improving the Sectoral Qualification System for the Development and Quality Assurance of Vocational Training* the term “transversal skills” is used (the term “transversal skills” is also used in the European Commission and UNESCO documents). “Transversal skills” are understood as self-knowledge and self-awareness, thinking and creativity, cooperation and participation and digital literacy (Izglītība mūsdienīgai lietpratībai..., 2017).

In the final report of the WEF entitled *The Future of Jobs Report* (2018a), skills such as creativity, critical thinking, originality and initiative, persuasion and negotiation skills are named as “human skills”. In Latvian, the soft skills are sometimes translated as “social skills”, sometimes as “simple” or even “individual skills”. On the other hand, the OECD reports *The Future of Education and Skills. Education 2030* (2018) talks about “transformative competences”, understanding the growing need to be innovative, responsible and self-aware.

Methodology

The aim of this article is to find out whether and what kind of mechanisms enterprises use in the rapidly changing business circumstances to determine their training needs, as well as whether enterprises in Latvia have common training topics. To specify the research question, the qualitative research method was chosen. The data were obtained through a semi-structured interview. The

method of thematic analysis was used for data processing and analysis. Taking into account the author's fifteen-year experience in identifying adult learning needs and organising the respective training, a small sample of study was developed selecting experts as respondents in the field of study. The author interviewed the HR managers from four large enterprises (over 1000 employees) with both foreign and local capital. The interviews were conducted at respondents' workplaces, and a dictaphone was used for recording. After the transcript of the interviews was carried out, it was possible to conclude a number of common trends in determining the training needs of employees in all four enterprises.

The following questions in terms of determining the training needs were asked to the respondents – the HR representatives, whose daily work is closely linked with the subject of this study:

1. Does your company support staff training?
2. Is training supported for all employees, or only for individual job groups/positions?
3. How are the staff training needs identified?
4. What have been the key training areas/topics in the last three years?

In the context of Latvia, large enterprises (in terms of the number of employees) in the private sector were targeted for the study. As the author of the article has observed in the framework of her professional activities, large private sector companies are trendsetters in the context of the staff training culture. Taking into account the sample of the study, the results cannot be extended either to the public sector, or to small enterprises (with a number of employees up to 50) and medium enterprises (with a number of employees up to 250) in Latvia.

Research outcomes

The first question of the interview – whether the company in question supports the staff training – was answered in the affirmative by all four representatives; however, the approaches were different when answering the question whether training is supported for all employees, or only for individual job groups/positions. In half of the enterprises surveyed – that is, two – the respondents confirmed that training was offered to all employees, while the other two confirmed that different measures were taken. Namely, one of the respondents replied that the training is supported “primarily for managers of different levels”, whereas the other respondent replied: “The training needs are identified at the level of the departments. First of all, the employee's needs, second, the manager's vision, are taken into account.” This approach is related to the principle of determining the training needs in a given enterprise. An

employee and his or her direct manager are involved in identifying the training needs.

If the manager and employee's understanding of the required training during the annual appraisal coincides, the training shall be included in the budget plan for the following year in the order of priority. Similarly, the training needs are identified in two other enterprises surveyed, where in one case the enterprise defines the criteria and sums them up in the *Excel* table. The department managers are delegated to fill out the table once a year. In the second case, in the company where training is offered mainly to managers at different levels, the next year's training needs are identified in discussions with a representative of the HR department. It should be noted that the respondent of this enterprise pointed out that a large proportion of employees were sceptical about these discussions, since under limited budgetary conditions not all training could have been carried out over several years.

One of the enterprises surveyed has developed an accurately organised procedure of the training needs identification. In particular, every new employee receives a road map, which highlights the skills needed for the particular job, which, in turn, are divided into "compulsory" and "optional" in accordance to several levels. In cooperation with the training centre established in the enterprise, the employee is responsible for acquiring the skills needed for his or her job within 12 months, while the enterprise provides the staff with the necessary resources of time (training during working hours) and money (training paid by the enterprise). Such a principle of "road map" echoes with the previously mentioned increasing numbers of freelance employees. Detailed guidance on the set of knowledge, skills and competences needed for the particular project would give the employee an opportunity to assess their eligibility for the job in a more accurate manner, and forecast the amount of investment needed to obtain the knowledge that was missing if it were to be paid for by himself or herself (which in the case of freelance employment is likely to be the case). Perhaps, such a system may be a step towards the reskilling revolution, which is discussed in the report of the WEF on *Towards a Reskilling Revolution* (2018b).

The interviews highlighted three major trends in determining the training needs. First, the principle of urgency, that is, technical training to ensure the lawful operation of an enterprise. Secondly, the principle of professional development. This block includes a variety of types and forms of the so-called cross-functional skills (as mentioned above, also termed in Latvian as "social" or "transversal") and development training. Thirdly, the lessons dictated by the development of information technologies. They are more characteristic to the enterprises in the information and communication technology sector and could also be included in the second group mentioned herein. The three-block

breakdown was characterised by all respondents, but there were differences in one of them.

All respondents unanimously referred to the training related to the direct functions of the enterprise as the largest block, defining it in a variety of ways, such as technical, mandatory or regulatory (stipulated by law). The second block included the training described as business related. One of the respondents defined this training as corporate strategic training (or related). In the third block, two of the respondents mentioned the soft skills training using this English term, while in the company where the training needs are marked on the “road map”, the third block was described as a “professional development” block by the respondent.

It should be noted that two of the respondents surveyed used English terms to describe the training. This could indicate that the terms for identifying specific types of training and content have not been established in Latvian language. On the other hand, the respondents represent enterprises in which the daily working language is English, and thus it is understandable that the respondents used the same terms as in the working documents and day-to-day communication. Nevertheless, in the enterprise, where the term “soft skills” was used, these skills were described as communication, presentation, leadership, negotiation and coaching skills. It resonates with the characterization mentioned by the respondent, when defining professional development skills, including also foreign language training.

By extending the question about the third-block training, the respondents were questioned in terms of the key training topics/fields in the last three years. It was asked whether there have been any changes compared to an earlier period. Two of the respondents named communication and presentation skills. Furthermore, leadership skills, time management and stress management skills, artificial intelligence, and self-awareness were also mentioned. It can be concluded from the replies that the 21st century skills mentioned in the scholarly sources used in this article – such as analytical and critical thinking, complex problem solving, emotional intelligence, system analysis and evaluation (OECD, 2018), are not yet included in the training agenda of enterprises in Latvia.

From the replies provided by one of the respondents, it can be concluded that the recent changes have affected the form of the training, and not so much the content. Enterprises are looking for ways to opt out of the traditional learning form – sitting in the classroom and listening to the lecturer. It is partly replaced by reading professional literature and online courses. One of the respondents noted: “(...) the recruitment and motivation policy is changing on a global scale. There are talented and educated employees, and progressive enterprises fight for them.” This statement echoes with the argument expressed previously, namely, that people will increasingly be responsible for improving

their knowledge, skills and competences, so that not only will they would have an opportunity to have a well-paid job, but also they would be able to stay in the current workplace. Training is changing in terms of the form; more engagement is required from the employees themselves. Not only they participate in training as listeners, but they also become trainers for their colleagues. This is the direction taken by the three of the surveyed enterprises, thus it is necessary to talk about the development of “workplace pedagogy” in Latvia and to study this phenomenon in the future.

Conclusions

As the gap between the skills and competences demanded in the labour market and the ability of the formal education system to ensure the possibility to acquire them is widening, increasingly more enterprises are becoming “learning places”. In addition, the understanding of the competence of a modern and competitive employee goes far beyond the definition, which means “to increase competence for doing certain jobs” (Kubr & Prokopenko, 1989). Eurostat data show that compared to 2005, the number of enterprises providing further vocational training and development to their employees has increased more than twice in Latvia and in 2015 reached 99.9% of the surveyed enterprises. The aim of the study was to find out whether there are any mechanisms for identifying the training needs in the ever-changing business circumstances and what are the key training topics in the workplaces in Latvia, how much they include the 21st century skills such as analytical and critical thinking, complex problem solving, emotional intelligence, system analysis and evaluation, etc. (WEF, 2018a). It could be concluded from the interviews that all the surveyed enterprises share three trends in determining the training needs of employees. All respondents provided a breakdown of three blocks, but there were differences in terms of the content in the third block listed below:

- 1) the principle of urgency, that is, technical training to ensure the lawful activity of an enterprise;
- 2) the principle of professional development of employees, that is, different types of cross-functional skills (also referred to as social, transversal or soft skills in other sources);
- 3) training dictated by information technologies; though it is more characteristic to the IT enterprises and could also be included in the second block mentioned here.

Communication and presentation skills dominate the key training topics in two of the enterprises surveyed. Leadership skills, time management and stress management skills, artificial intelligence and self-awareness were also mentioned among others.

From the provided answers it was possible to draw a conclusion that the 21st century skills mentioned in the scholarly literature in this article, such as analytical and critical thinking, problem solving, system analysis and evaluation, have not yet been included on the agenda of the training plans of the enterprises surveyed.

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