

Why demand-driven apprenticeships make sense in increasing the employment prospects of young people and in closing skills gaps

Participating in apprenticeships is but one of many ways employers can acquire and develop the skills they need, while improving the employability of the younger generation. In this article, Michael Axmann, ILO Senior Skills Specialist, provides the Global Skills for Employment Knowledge Sharing Platform an overview of his experience in implementing the ILO's quality apprenticeship programme and how it opens up pathways to skilled employment.

I always find it amazing to see how employers in so many different countries shy away from participating in apprenticeship programmes that are largely designed to help young people overcome the work-inexperience trap blocking their transition from education to employment. Frequently labelled as work-based learning, many so-called apprenticeships, however, contain minimal work-based elements - in some countries as little as one month per year during the first years of the apprenticeship. These “short-term dips” into the world of work are very often determined by government policy-makers responsible for these programmes rather than driven by the demand or needs of industries and services. Often, they are simply not sufficient to help young people make the transition from school-to-work, nor effectively address youth unemployment.

The ILO's quality apprenticeship approach offers something completely different. What is more, many employers fully support it.

Our logic is quite simple: employers articulate their skills needs and identify skills mismatches in selected sectors with job creation potential. Next, we start working with them and representatives of trade unions and government. The employers are in the driver's seat, however, during the entire consultation process. This result is a quality apprenticeship scheme that directly addresses the skills that employers need, while growing a committed, engaged workforce and opening up pathways for new talent into their organizations, occupations and sectors.

There are clear differences between apprenticeships based on skills needs as opposed to a supply-driven approach; and employers appreciate the former. Still, government ministries need to allow the social partners, employers in particular, to play an even bigger role in developing apprenticeship frameworks and management structures, and maintaining and evaluating such programmes. Admittedly, it is not always an easy process, but the benefits will almost certainly far outweigh any perceived challenges and barriers. All of the countries where I have worked over the last four years have advocated for the programme, including, among others, Costa Rica, Greece, Indonesia, Jamaica, Kenya, Latvia, Mexico, Portugal, South Africa, and Spain.

Seventy-five per cent of all small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Germany, more than 80 per cent of all SMEs in Switzerland and 50 per cent of the sugar mill owners registered in the Association of Employers in the Sugar Sector in Mexico participate in quality apprenticeships.

They all do so, not because they are forced to but because they see the benefits of giving young people the relevant skills needed in a specific sector or occupation. Knowledgeable employers recognize the cost-benefits of taking on apprentices and are recuperating the costs of their investment as early as the second year of apprenticeships.

This is the logic we are trying to convey through our work in advocating for quality apprenticeships. If we can manage to get the formula right we can help to establish a strong system – one that responds to closing the skills gaps and increasing the employment prospects of young people when effectively combined with national efforts to spur job growth.

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