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According to the International Labour Organization, more than 1.5 billion people globally are either in vulnerable or insecure jobs. While the weakening job market is reflective of a slowing economy, it also raises the issue of workers' capacity to reskill as job requirements change. The question governments have to answer about their job preparation systems is whether public sector occupational training systems are evolving quickly enough to adapt to the retraining needs of workers made redundant by technological innovation. This article offers a simplified framework for realigning workforce preparation systems for the reskilling of workers as well as trainees and new job seekers.

Keywords: jobs, learning contracts, national training agency, occupational skills, proactive learning, skill-job mismatch, technical and vocational education and training reform

REVIVING WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

The world is experiencing a skilled labor shortage and a growing unemployment rateⁱ. Germany, India, China, and the United States are all experiencing a lack of skilled workers, according to the global staffing agency Manpower Groupⁱⁱ. Skilled jobs are available but there are not enough workers with relevant skills to fill them. Globally an estimated three quarters of employers are experiencing a lack of workers having the technical and business knowledge competencies needed to fill job vacanciesⁱⁱⁱ.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has estimated that 34 million people have lost jobs because of the current economic crisis^{iv}. Among European Union members, the unemployment rate for ages 15-24 years is 20.3 percent^v. By the end of last year, globally some 75.1 million youth were looking for work according to the ILO. Youth in developed countries face a mix of high unemployment and increased inactivity while youth in developing countries face low paying jobs and cycles of persistent high working poverty^{vi}. This is not a very promising employment outlook for unskilled workers of any age as the private sector increases investments in technology, which requires workers with 21st - century skills. Yet, even as unemployment is increasing, there are decent jobs available for skilled workers. While occupational training cannot create jobs, it can prepare a workforce with higher-level occupational skills – skill sets that will be continually valued in the coming decade.

According to Michael Spence, winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in Economics, the sector showing the most growth in advanced economies has been the tradable sector. This sector is mainly associated with jobs in manufacturing and exported goods, requiring higher technical skills. In a related report about the tradable sector and productivity, the US Bureau of Economic Analysis in a 2010 report showed that employers in the US invested 4% spending on new hires and a 25% increase in spending on technology. This investment in technology and productivity rather than people is a growing trend that will affect the employability of workers, especially job seekers with limited skills while charting a new direction for workforce retraining.

The impact of rapid technological advancements in the workplace should challenge TVET systems to ensure that in addition to specific occupational skills training, systems must also promote learning-to-learn skills and strategies that workers can utilize over a lifetime for retraining. Two groups of learners who already fit the profile of being multiskilled with workplace experiences that, with minimal retraining, could rapidly enrich a national workforce, are the unemployed and under-employed workers.

STRATEGY 1: Reskilling - Targeting the recently unemployed

Employment trends in Europe and the United States suggest that workers with higher levels of skills have greater job opportunities in the current labour market^{vii}. The challenge for governments working through their national workforce development system is how best to quickly raise the skill levels of the unemployed to make them more employable.

Researchers suggest that the long-term unemployed, six months or longer, are often perceived by employers to have lost their key work skills and are often no longer sought after for hiring^{viii}. In addition, because of their absence from the workplace, the long-term unemployed too often become discouraged workers and no longer actively seek employment. Simply put, the retraining of redundant workers during the first six months of their redundancy offers the best period for introducing rapid reskilling programmes. While TVET leadership faces many challenges in today's economic

downturn, the need to retrain redundant workers in specific occupational skill areas soon after redundancy will require a different approach from preparing first-time job seekers.

Returning workers with relevant skills to the job force in the shortest amount of time will require not only identifying new skills to be learned but also assessing existing skill competencies and the most effective way those skills can be upgraded. Creating a “learning profile” (LP) detailing a learner’s work history would be the first step in organizing a customized retraining programme. The learning profile would contain the learner’s work history, the skill competencies to be mastered, and resources needed for training. Once completed, the learning profile would serve as a guide and learning contract in developing an individualized training plan^{ix}.

Challenges for TVET instructors when reskilling redundant workers includes, in addition to occupational skills, strategies on job-hunting, and skills associated with problem solving, communication, and leadership. Depending on the training needs of the learner, typical instructional delivery formats may include face-to-face instruction, providing access to workplace mentoring, training vouchers, subsidized pay, flexible working schedules, and on-the-job training attachments. Whatever blended training delivery approach used, it would need to be competency-based, reflect adult learning principles and national and local occupational skill standards^x.

Identifying underemployed workers prior to their redundancy, and the development of a learning profile prior to retraining, should become a major element in what N-TVET systems do as a component of a national labour market intervention programme. However, to align workers’ retraining for under-employed or redundant workers will require collaboration between TVET leadership, employers, trade unions, and job seekers. This is a management process geared to produce an employable skilled workforce, best accomplished through an occupational coordinating national lead body.

STRATEGY 2: Coordinated Training Delivery

Titles for national public sector occupational coordinating lead bodies vary. Some are called a national-technical and vocational education and training (N-TVET) agency; the term used in this article. Other titles include National Skills Council (NSC) or Workforce Development Authority (WDA). TVET coordinating bodies often serve as both a workforce preparation agency and a local administrative body such as a community college or polytechnic. Whatever the title chosen, it should suggest a clear description of the national workforce preparation services it provides and / or the training institutions the agency oversees. In addition to providing advisory support on technical curricula, the committee works to promote credibility for technical and vocational education and training programmes.

Establishing a national TVET agency to coordinate public and private sector training is critical for avoiding the duplication of occupational-related services while maximizing the use of national training resources. Yet, it is not enough for an N-TVET agency to provide job training preparation unless those services are viewed as trustworthy by employers and the community. In addition to the use of occupational skill standards, N-TVET agencies need to communicate directly with employers, trade unions, and community organizations to keep skills training relevant, valid, and reliable. A solution to improve the relevance of occupational training systems is by establishing the N-TVET agency as an autonomous body with a multi-sectoral management committee (MSMC)^{xi}.

Composed of public and private sector representation, the management committee has the responsibility for ensuring the relevance of instructional content through collaboration with workers, employers, and government^{xii}. The reasons for establishing an MSMC is that it serves as a conduit for gathering and applying information drawn from labour market data while providing first hand communication with public and private sector leadership. An additional reason for establishing an autonomous N-TVET

agency is that it helps to promote a continuity of personnel and occupational good practices and private sector contacts during times of national political change.

A sampling of enabling strategies for a national TVET agency to pursue includes:

- Promoting relevant instruction by carrying out continual audits of institutional capacity to ensure that personnel have the skill sets, instructional resources, and policy supports to prepare a national relevant workforce.
- Expanding occupational instructional delivery through in-plant training, or mobile centers, and by engaging employers to share their occupationally specialized staff as trainers and mentors.
- Supporting the establishment of industry led-TVET training institutions to encourage enterprises and training agencies to collaborate on occupational skill development for job seekers and instructional staff^{xiii}.
- Promoting information communication technology (ICT) not only for skills training delivery but also as a network for the sharing of ideas among N-TVET personnel. The ICT-TVET process would include establishing an international consortium of TVET agencies to promote peer-to-peer collaboration, the sharing of occupational skill competencies, employment trends, and occupational skill standards - a consortium built on the idea that dialogue encourages spontaneous collaboration, skills driven innovation, jobs, and a more creative labour market^{xiv}. The establishment of a dedicated ICT global network to advance TVET good workforce practices would differ from current informational technology systems in that it would be a customized communication channel for issues directly affecting the services of N-TVET agencies and their personnel.

NEW LANDSCAPES

No time in recent history have national TVET systems and their constituents been more challenged to build a workforce recognized for its occupational competence. However, to create a workforce with occupational relevance will depend on how willing government and private sector leadership is to invest their energy, political capital and finances to rebuild their national workforce preparation system – institution by institution. This makes the argument at the national and local level for the necessity to invest in developing a workforce able to compete in the global job marketplace - doing less undermines not only a nation's economic competitiveness but future prosperity as well.

The global trend by employers to increase productivity through the upgrading of equipment to improve worker output is increasingly a force in shaping the size and look of a national workforce. For TVET providers the challenge will be how well training systems are able to embrace simultaneously various design models to deliver occupational skills. These training models can reflect the skill requirements of distinctive target groups such as trainees, new job seekers and redundant workers.

In addition to training in technical skills, employers will need workers with a broader range of behavioral skills associated with questioning, information gathering, and problem solving. Clearly in preparing today's workforce, TVET leadership will need to ensure both specific technical and behavioral skill content in the curricula but also ensure instructional staff have the skills to mentor workers to become self-directed learners as well.

As the world becomes more connected through social networking, trade, information technology, and economic uncertainty, opportunities also expand to accelerate and target employment preparation^{xv}. This article has proposed giving greater emphases to

the retraining of unemployed and underemployed workers as an effective approach in creating a relevant workforce. An under-utilized workforce preparation strategy that N-TVET systems have not given enough priority to. However, the process of creating changes in how workforce learning and development evolves will only begin when public and private sector decision makers recognize that a one-size fit for all workforce preparation programmes will no longer work.

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