

Leonardo da Vinci Innovation Transfer Project 2007-2009

Project: COMMET

Transfer of innovation and new methods for identifying vocational competence within vocational education in the metal and electrical sector as illustrated by two vocations

Report on Workpackage VI: Interviews in companies in the regional metal and electrical industries and with national experts to examine the possible application of the competence grids developed

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Within the framework of the COMMET project, five interviews were carried out in order to assess the application of the developed tools within sectoral companies. The tools analysed are:

- Competence grid for metal cutting technician
- Competence grid for electro-mechanical technician
- International competence grid for both vocations
- The Draft of a Sectoral Qualification Framework for Metal Industries developed within the EACEA project "METAL QF" N. 2007-103467/TRA-EQF-DE-EACEA, which also tries to consider further ideas introduced by the EQF.

The interviews were carried out on the basis of the model provided by the Lead Partner, considering the appropriateness of the resulting job description within the manufacturing process and its relationship with HR management tasks: selection and recruitment, staff assessment and development.

As the tools were the results of previous polls within companies, to proceed to a feedback SIAV proposed the interview to one SME (68 employees) not previously involved and to one LE (over 400 employees) participating in the tools definition. Moreover, taking into account the organisational traits of the local economy – the Veneto region – featured mainly by SME's type, three HR experts at national level were involved. Large companies may, in fact, have enough staff to apply such a detailed tool, but in HR non-standard tasks SME's rely mostly on external personnel. The experts were:

- a. An University professor (Business Organization Chair)
- b. A HR developer expert
- c. A Vocational trainer and expert in an academic institute for manager training

At the present time (October 2009), although asked, both the companies and the expert do not wish to publish their names. The SME manufactures aesthetic components for the appliance industry, while the LE provides the market with automation systems. Interviewees were staff in charge of HR and training management.

Overview of results

The outcomes will be presented grouped by proposed question. When relevant, the report will point out if the remarks and/or suggestions came by experts or from companies. With regard to methodology, the tools were sent four days in advance, and then further explained and commented by phone and/or face to face.

Q. 1 - The spheres of activity, are they defined and outlined appropriately?

A.1 - Both the experts and the companies agree that the spheres of activity are appropriately outlined. One expert suggests adding a “*people management/coaching*” sphere.

Q. 2 - The phases of a complete action, are they described to the point?

A.2 - The phases are definitely very detailed. The companies feel that the phases are even too detailed. One company particularly appreciates:

“The phases consider the whole activity process, which may seem an interesting perspective, not actually applied in our company.” (LE interview)

Nonetheless: *“The headlines of the phases are not immediately clear to me”*. (LE interview)

One expert suggests adding a Labour Code and other law regulations within the specialist knowledge column, as well as the ability to consider economic factors in each activity phase and competence dimension. However, some useful information is still missing.

Let me give you an example for metal cutting from an expert:

“In the sphere of activity “Machine maintenance and malfunction handling”, and in particular, in the “Analysing” phase, there is the specialist knowledge “Able to identify problems”. In my opinion, the statement is very unspecific. It is opportune to specify the typology of problem (simple? complex?) and, then, how could we determine if a problem is simple or complex (causes? context? effects on the performances of the process?)” (Expert c)

Moreover:

“I advise adding the factor economics for each phase and competence dimension. Many decisions are based on economic factors.” (Expert c)

The experts pointed out how even for the supervisors it is important to know the basic notions about costs (classification, terminology, etc...) and the main principles of management control. The dimension of economics is more relevant in today's business environment: the efforts to save costs and for efficiency start from within the

factory. The “blue” and “white collar” workers have to understand the basic language concerning revenues, costs, expenses to perform their duties in the most efficient way (open business approach) and to contribute to the company strategy in a proactive way. These issues are even more important for specialists such as metal cutting technicians and mechatronics.

Q.3 - *The competence dimensions, are they plausible/ feasible? And which distinctions do you prefer: those of the SQF or those of competence profiles?*

A.3 - This question aroused perplexities during the interviews, and interestingly enough their suggestions came out in form of questions. The main point was about the difference between social and personal competence which appeared not so clear on the headlines. Experts and companies asked:

“Social competence could be better defined as “organizational”?” (Expert b)

“Shall the personal competence somehow refer to individual attitudes instead of skills?” (LE enterprise)

To summarize the answers, the phases are actually artificially divided, it would be easier to identify the competences within the spheres of activity and analyse the competence dimensions. Moreover, it will be useful to set out a quantitative method to measure the level of competence. It has to be brought out how social competences and personal competences may vary from company to company, according to its size and organisational structure. In small companies, for instance, the relationship between workers, managers and entrepreneurs may differ from the formal organizational chart presented.

Additionally, an updated analysis of skills and competences held by human resources department is rarely, if ever, upgraded on a regular basis. Therefore, it is even harder to identify them.

With regard to the wage level, as the agreements are discussed and implemented at national level:

“It does not seem consistent with any HR policy to apply to any reference other than the national contract” (SME).

Q. 4. *The competence profiles, are they applicable, e.g. to the certificate supplement of the Europass?*

A. 4. The competences profiles need to be improved to be fully applicable. Improvement suggestions came mainly from experts, as companies’ staff knows and uses EU CV but never heard about the Europass Certificate Supplement:

- The profiles are a **static** tool. Companies need to link description of competences to an **evaluation grading**, in order to identify training needs and get guidelines for actions. An expert suggests to link the last “Evaluation” phase to the first “Analysis”, in order to set out an **“innovation/improvement”** dynamic input.

- Introduce the “**experience**” variable in order to identify at least “junior”, “middle” and “senior” levels.
- The use of the **Europass** is not yet known enough to consider it. Nonetheless the outputs of the competence profiles could be useful to fill the EU CV.

Q. 5. *Between the competence profiles and the SQF, can you imagine applying these or a combination between them in your HR department? If it were a combination, what should it look like?*

The SQF seems a more complete tool, but the leveling grades and the nuances need to be explained and an **assessment scale** needs to be set up. Parameters and criteria should include **practical examples** in order to facilitate its applicability to users:

“Try to give practical examples for each level of competence. This effort will facilitate the homogeneous implementation of the process.” (Experts b and c)

Moreover, a **checklist** based on the profile grids could be an integrating tool easier to apply to, as

“Part of the competence definition is provided by the technical supervisor, who rarely has any HR management skills” (SME and LE).

Creating standards based on the competence profiles might be very useful if they **highlight competence gaps** and provide suggestion to an individual **growth** towards the **next level**:

“It could be interesting to determine how a person could achieve the next level of competences: for example, with specific training programs, training on the job examinations? In this way it would be easier for the HR and practitioners in charge of staff development to design competence improvement action plans at individual and plant levels.” (Expert c)

As a general remark, the answers outlined how profiles’ group / guidelines are defined in strict relationship to **technical/professional competences** in order to:

- To provide **flexible guidelines to design vocational training actions** and to secure the focus on core competences. This aim is not fully attained by the grid, as it looks far more complex in comparison to benefit/cost consideration. So, the national version will need to be simplified;
- be a **reference for the Training Plan**. The tools fulfil this aim and are positively evaluated in this regard.

Moreover, the added value pointed out by experts and SME referred to the effort of an EU homogenisation of the matter, even if it will not solve the problem of qualifications evaluation for non-EU nationals.

Short description of the model „competence profiles“ used

The “competence profile” used is the result of a combined approach at transnational level. The model proposed by bbw was integrated and filled with the outcomes of a review on the national state of the study, provided by ISFOL (Institute for the Development of Vocational Training for Workers), Federmeccanica (the Italian Federation of Metalworking Industries) and the regional repository of Emilia-Romagna, the latter being the base for the Region Veneto repository (P5 acts in this region). The profiles were moreover referred to as the main qualification systems considered both by vocational training professionals and enterprises, namely: ISCO, ISTAT (national statistical system), the Ministry of Labour classification system and vocation codes, the EXCELSIOR information system. Nonetheless, evidence showed that none of description investigated fitted the two vocations analysed, therefore the collected information was incorporated with:

- the competences outputs provided by Technical Secondary School (national curricula) and Vocational Training Centres (regional curricula);
- empirical observation in six enterprises (mainly SME’s): the research focussed on activities recognition through key performances analysis, handling styles and difficulties in relationship to specialist and/or strategic competences, while knowledge and skills were considered as “technical” and “transversal”.
- again a feedback from HR staff in two companies (1 SME and 1 LE) and three experts (in organizational processes, engineering and HR management) at national level.

Within both vocations five spheres of activities were identified and each was further divided into phases of complete activity. The approach was highly appreciated from the theoretical point of view but needs further adaptation to be useful for HR jobs within companies.

Project results about international competences

International competences are considered from the national and regional curricula of both vocations. Qualitative interviews and analysis of provided documentation took place in a National Technology and Industry Institute – ITIS “A. Rossi” in Vicenza and in regional Vocational Training Centre - CFP “Lepido Rocco” in Motta di Livenza (VE). The information gathered showed how international competences may vary from field-related specialized ones – such as compliance with international standards of quality combined with safety rules application, application of programming in languages other than the mother tongue – to social and cognitive competences, such as the adaptation to other cultural contexts as well as the acceptance of other cultural approaches not only on the workplace/school, but also in other environments, in order to improve communication and effectiveness processes.

The interviewed companies and experts were confronted with the above-mentioned results and expressed the importance of international competences mainly when referred to professional profiles who might deal with external customers, such as mechatronic technicians, but the companies interviewed did not feel it to be of utmost importance when referred to metal cutting workers.

Asked about the importance of communication processes within manufacturing between local and migrant workers, answers outlined how informal solutions overcome formal recognition of the issue:

- *“We prefer not to hire foreign workers, even if they possess higher motivation, because they will probably ask for longer holiday time in order to go back home, thus increasing manufacturing process and HR management constraints. Once they work with us, most of them show a higher commitment to their job, and a stronger will to smooth relationships and enhance communication”;*
- *“If any problem arises among workers of different nationalities, the foreman is in charge of the matter’s solution”* (even if the foreman does not possess any formal intercultural management competence)

Finally, one expert suggested to introduce within the international competences some reference to the knowledge and the ability to apply to international and national labor regulation law, particular with regard to the technician profiles which might have to travel to comply with their job duties (maintenance of a product/machine sold abroad, necessity to cooperate or coordinate with foreign labor force *in situ*).

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