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healthy learning
in SME

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HLS - Healthy learning in SMEs

Regional report on the healthy learning environment within SMEs – Germany

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Abstract

The aim of the report is to analyse the regional SMEs workplace culture regarding their healthy learning environment. The background for looking at this aspect is the fact that nowadays life long learning is not only necessary to ensure employability, but that SMEs need well qualified staff to stay competitive. But how much attention do SMEs pay to this matter? And if so, in what sort of way? Are SMEs already providing a workplace which enables employees to continuously learn? And what about the prerequisites which facilitates employees to learn at the workplace?

These were the questions looked at, taking into account studies and surveys coming from different sources like the ministry, insurance companies, unions, chambers, SMEs, and finally by directly asking SMEs.

1. The regional situation regarding vocational training and work-based learning

Starting point was a more general perspective at the situation of extended vocational training in Germany based on a study of the ministry for Education and research [Weiterbildungsverhalten in Deutschland AES 2010 Trendbericht]. Aim of the study was to make an analysis of trends regarding the continuing process of education / learning. For this purpose 7.035 people from the age of 18 – 64 years were interviewed regarding their vocational training behaviour in the past 12 month. The interviewees were asked questions regarding their life and working situation, educational background, motivation, duration of their learning activities, and the kind of learning activities, while focussing on formal and non formal education. By using this terminology, formal education means learning / training activities which are typically provided by education or training institutions with structured learning objectives, learning time and learning support. It is intentional on the part of the learner and leads to certification. In comparison non-formal learning is not provided by an education or training institution and typically does not lead to certification. However, it is intentional on the part of the learner and has structured objectives, times and support. [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc52_en.htm, 29.2.2012]

According to the studies in 2010, 42% of the interviewees were taking part in a formal or non-formal learning activity. This is a bit lower than in 2007, where the percentage rate was 44%. From this a percentage of 60% were taking part in extended vocational training (betrieblicher Weiterbildung). Comparing it with 2007, there has been an increase of short-term training (just lasting a couple of hours), which rose from 41 % to 47 % and a decrease of training lasting for a couple of days, which went down from 34% to 27%. Asked about the motivation for taking part in the training, 80% said that they were doing it for professional purposes. This goes together with the fact that 81% of those taking part in the training were in employment. 52% were asked by the employer to take part in the training. Almost 55% of the training activities were taking place during the working hours. In most cases the training did not lead to a certificate. Just 24% received a certificate, while most participants just received a certificate of participation, which means that in most cases it was a kind of non-formal training. Additionally it can be stated that more employees who worked full time and had a contract with an unlimited duration were taking part in work related training. Another interesting fact is the relation between the size of the company and the extended vocational training. While only 28% of employees working in SMEs up to 10 employees are taking part in work related training, the amount raises up to 50% companies with 250 – 999 employees.

Age and sex is also an aspect which has to be taken into account, when looking at the rate of employees participating in vocational training.

In all types of continuous vocational training, may it be in a private company or public organised type of training institution, two groups with the lowest participation rates in continuous vocational training can be identified: This is the group between the age of 18/19 – 24 and those who are between 60-64. [compare Abbildung 15: Weiterbildungsteilnahme unter Erwerbstätigen nach Alter, pg. 35].

No further reason has been given but it can be assumed that the age group of 18/19 – 24 has just finished their apprenticeship or university degree and are not yet promoted by the employer to take part in additional trainings, since they have to get established in the company first. On the other hand, the age group of 60-64 is close to retirement and either no longer promoted and encouraged to take part in vocational trainings, or is no longer interested themself.

There is also a distinction between the number of men and women participating in vocational training. While in 2010 28% (2007 / 33%) of male employees took part in continuous

vocational training, the percentage rate of women taking part was 23% (2007 / 25%). [Compare Abbildung 13: Weiterbildungsteilnahme nach Geschlecht 2007 und 2010, pg. 31] This is due to the fact that those working full time have better access to continuous vocational training than those working part-time.

But since the number of those men who are working full-time (92%) is much higher than the number of women in full-time jobs (46%) this is not a question which can be directly related to gender but to the discrepancy between full-time and part-time jobs.

According to a study called "Bildung in Deutschland – 2010", Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung the amount of extended vocational training offered by a company does depend on aspects like:

- operating results, in particular true for SMEs
- innovation activity
- activity on the global market / international competition
- number of employees working in low-skilled or high-skilled jobs. Meaning that extended vocational training decreases when more than 30% of employees are working in low-skilled jobs. [Compare page 142].

Another interesting aspect is that both studies do not give any percentage rates regarding informal learning.

According to EU-Definition "informal learning results from daily activities related to work, family life or leisure. Informal learning is not structured and usually does not lead to certification. The point is that informal learning is usually unintentionally on the part of the learner." [http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc52_en.htm, 29.2.2012]

This means, most employees are not aware of the fact that learning can and also does happen apart from taking part in seminars and trainings. The same is true when looking at a more regional level, say Berlin and Brandenburg. Both, the "Betriebspanel Brandenburg, Nr. 35" as well as the "Betriebspanel Berlin 2010" state that they are focussing on vocational training activities which are organised (formal-organisiert), and for which employees are exempted from work and / or costs are fully or partly taken over.

Apart from this wider perspective, which was not focussed on a special sector, statistics from the chamber of commerce and chamber of handicrafts (both East part of Brandenburg) were taken into consideration. In 2011, the chamber of commerce made an online-survey in which 14.299 enterprises were taking part. The sectors included were industry, building, IT/media, water/energy/sewage, trade, hospitality industry, traffic, insurance, and other services. About 77% of enterprises surveyed fell in the category SMEs. But it has to be mentioned and taken into account that the results of the survey were not split according to the size of the enterprises.

All in all, 98% of all enterprises were aware of the necessity of vocational training / learning. But obviously larger enterprises (not further defined) are more aware of this necessity and more willing to plan and invest in vocational training than the smaller once.

No particular reason was given for this matter, but it can be assumed that this is a combination of different reasons such as strategic and personnel planning as well as financial resources. The decision if an enterprise invests in vocational training highly depends on the expected outcome.

Another aspect mentioned was the fact that learning in smaller enterprises (not further defined) takes more often the form of informal learning, while larger enterprises tend to offer formal or non-formal training. This shows that work related training / learning within SMEs is a topic which needs to be improved.

The chamber of handicraft could not provide a comparable study. But it can be said that about 50% of the professions organised in the chamber of handicrafts have to take part in regular formal trainings, e.g. welders, chimney sweepers, electricians, or roofers just to name a few. The frequency of the training depends on the kind of profession and is regulated by German law. These compulsory trainings are offered by the chambers but also by other certified vocational training institutions and SMEs are free to choose from a wide selection. But the exams of these compulsory trainings have always to be taken by the chambers.

Apart from these compulsory trainings, 987 SMEs (out of 12.340), which is a percentage rate of 8% were interested in further vocational training and took advantage of the counselling service provided by the chamber of handicrafts. Formal learning without certification and informal learning is not in the focus of most SMEs and if so, only the younger generation (30-45) is interested in this matter.

With the chamber of handicrafts and the chamber of commerce there are two statutory bodies under public law, in which - generally speaking - traders, enterprises, and handicraft are organised. The membership is compulsory.

Apart from these statutory bodies there is a wide range of vocational training institutions. Some of the vocational training institutions are operating locally, others are spread all over Germany. They are playing an important role in the modern education scene and provide a wide range of courses and trainings for individuals and enterprises. There are all sorts of providers: churches, unions, social welfare, private institutions or the already mentioned chambers. They can be public or private organised, profit or non-profit orientated. Apart from the compulsory trainings for some professions mentioned above SMEs are free to choose whom and what suits them best.

Most vocational training institutions are certified according to certain standards, e.g. quality management which is a prerequisite for working with the employment agency or other public bodies. And of course, all companies as well as vocational training institutions have to stick to the rules set up by Occupational Health and Safety (OHS). The safety at work act consists of different regulations such as workplace regulations, construction ordinance, noise and vibration at work legislation, load handling regulation, computer work regulation, just to name some of them. But apart from these general regulations there is no particular regulation concerning health addressing vocational training institutions. This was also the reason for the former Grundtvig project "Health tutor in adult education" [www.healthtutor.eu]. Because with the exception of the statutory Health & Safety regulations, aspects promoting and preserving health (like breaks between study time, sensible activities during these breaks, catering services offering balanced diet opportunities as well as emotional aspects like relations with tutors and trainers and fellow students) were usually not an issue for individual adult education institutions.

Due to this fact the Healthtutor project developed a concept which enables an educational institution to implement corresponding changes to improve the concentration and receptivity of students, to strengthen their capacity and joy of learning, to reduce sickness and to enhance their integration into the labour market and trained "Health Tutors" from the participating vocational training institution

Since the Federal Ministry of Education and Research is well aware of the fact that "learning is an essential tool for acquiring education and thus for shaping one's individual opportunities, both in life and at work" [<http://www.bmbf.de/en/lebenslangeslernen.php>, 14.2.2012], there are different initiatives to promote the realization of life long learning. One example is the "Bildungsprämie". Background of the "Bildungsprämie" is to encourage employees to participate in vocational training or tutoring by supporting the participation with a maximum of 500 Euros. Apart from some prerequisites and restrictions the kind of training, formal or non-formal is not further defined.

2. Relevance of a healthy learning environment at the workplace

For staying competitive not only on the global but also on the regional market, it is essential for SMEs to have well trained staff, that is able to adapt to new challenges. A majority of SMEs seems to be aware of this fact and organises formal and non-formal trainings, whereas informal learning and providing the necessary prerequisites seems not to be in the focus yet. But learning does not happen by enforcing employees to do so, even if they are participating in an organised training. Instead, it needs certain prerequisites. So, the question is: are there any necessary prerequisites, or the other way round, what kind of obstructions lead to learning failures and unmotivated staff?

Looking at the IAQ (Institut Arbeit und Qualifikation) report, 2011-03, job satisfaction of employees in Germany is continuously going down since the 80s. This is in particular true for employees above the age of 50. Job satisfaction does also depend on the qualification of the employee (the higher the qualification, the higher the job satisfaction), but does hardly depend on the size of the company. Only companies with more then 2000 employees seem to offer more job satisfaction in general.

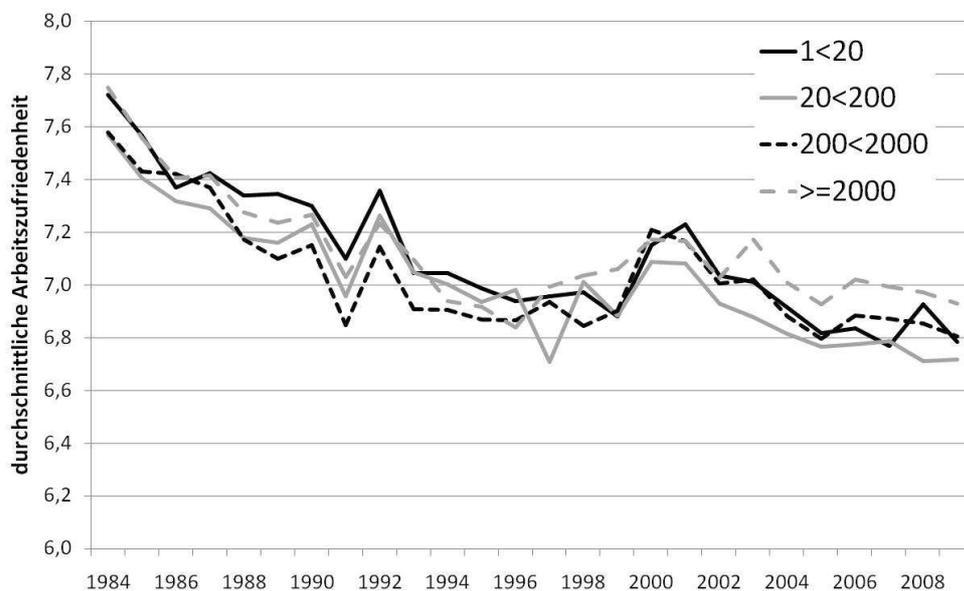


Diagram 1: Source, IAQ, page 4.

In comparison with other European countries, Germany does not seem to be a country which offers high job satisfaction. Additionally, depression and burn-out is increasing.

According to the DAK Report, representing figures from 6,6 Million policy holders, 13,4% were taking sick leave due to psychological problems. This figure has doubled within the last 5 years. [<http://www.gegenkopfschmerzen.de/blog/2012/02/15/macht-arbeit-krank-krankenstand-auf-hochstem-stand-seit-15-jahren/>, 17.2.2012] And according to the AOK-Fehlzeiten Report 2011, burn-out is meanwhile taking up to 10% of sick leaves in Germany [<http://bildungsklick.de/a/82305/didacta-2012-themendienst-die-arbeit-ist-kein-frosch-sie-huepft-nicht-weg/>, 17.2.2012]

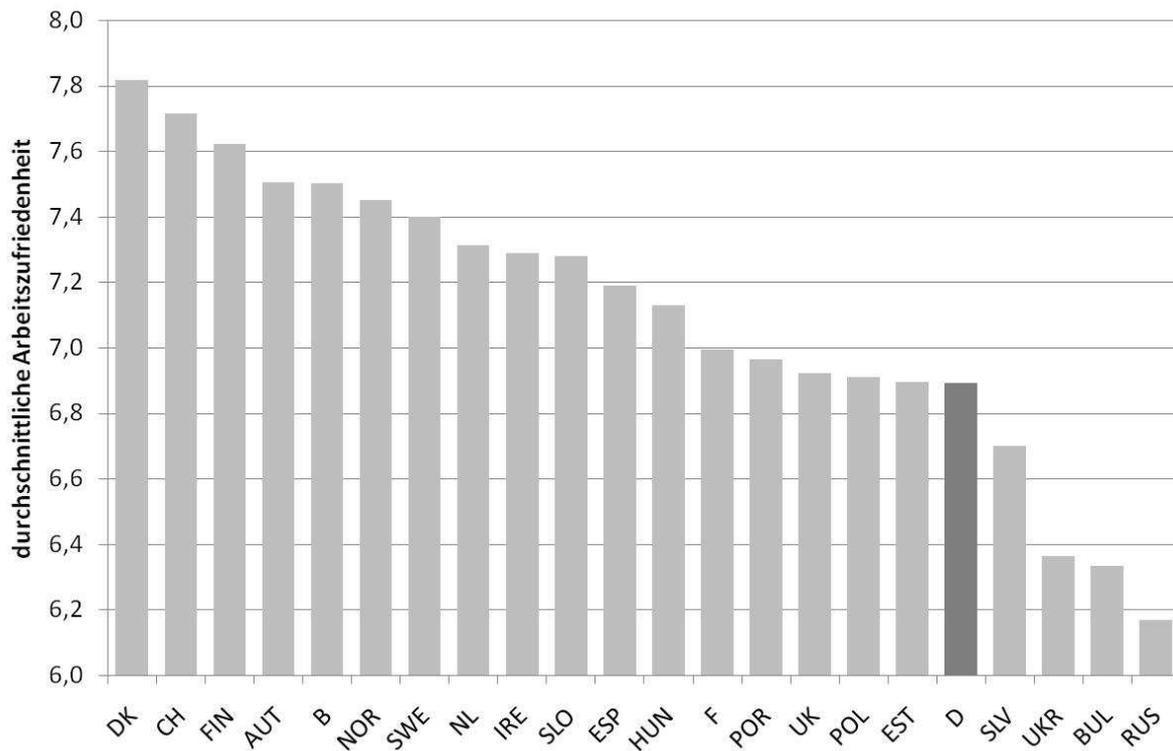


Diagram 2: Source, IAQ, page 5.

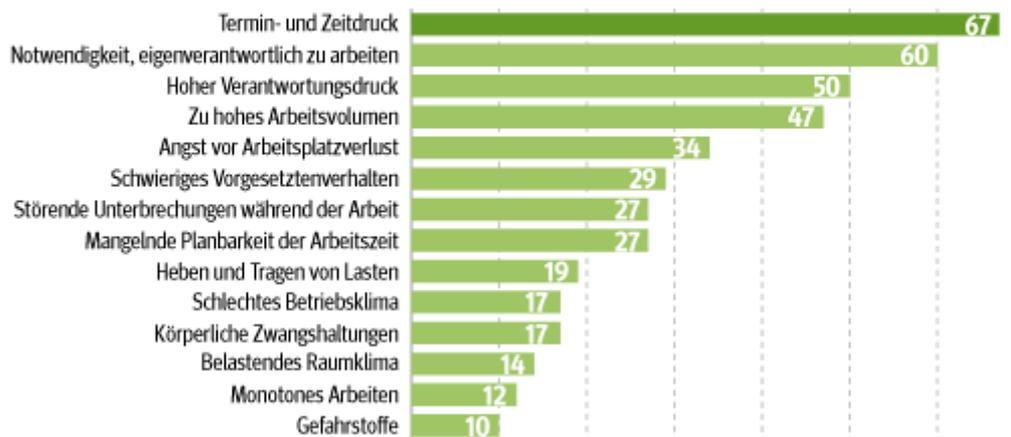
So what could be the reasons? According to IAQ, reasons given were the discrepancy between company profit and the stagnation of the real wages, increasing job pressure and stress, fear of job loss, and the combination of these aspects. The survey of the DGB (umbrella union) carried out in 2010 had a similar result. Main complaints included increasing workload and the burden of increasing responsibility. Furthermore, two out of three employees complained about time pressure and tight deadlines [<http://www.igmetall.de/cps/rde/xchg/internet/style.xsl/druck-am-arbeitsplatz-nimmt-stetig-zu-9323.htm>, 17.2.2012].

These more psychological aspects put much more burden on employees than e.g. carrying of heavy weights, monotonous work, negative working climate, bad working postures or hazardous material.

Another negative aspect is the missing approval many employees are facing. According to the "Fehlzeiten Report of the AOK (one of the large health insurances) carried out in 2011, which studied 147 companies with all in all 28.223 employees, 54,5% of the employees hardly ever or even never receive any approval from their superiors. 41,5% say, they are

never asked to give their opinion regarding important aspects and 35,5% think that more engagement of the management (caring more for the employees) would improve the health situation at the workplace [<http://www.welt.de/wirtschaft/karriere/article13548771/Wer-vom-Chef-gelobt-wird-ist-seltener-krank.html>, 17.2.2012]

Verbreitung unterschiedlicher Arbeitsbelastungen in den Betrieben (Angaben in Prozent)



INFOGRAFIK / QUELLE: WSI-PARGEMA-BEFRAGUNG 2011

Diagram 3: Source: <http://www.igmetall.de/cps/rde/xchg/internet/style.xsl/druck-am-arbeitsplatz-nimmt-stetig-zu-9323.htm>, 17.2.2012

The problematic situation a lot of employees are facing at the workplace, is not only known by the health insurances but also a well known topic discussed by several unions. Apart from the many tasks the unions are fulfilling, they are setting up recommendations, guidelines and check lists which help the employees to analyse their own situation. Examples are the „Arbeitszeit check“, or the „StressBarometer. While the „Arbeitszeit check“ enables employees to check if their working time is congenial to their health, the StressBarometer is a tool to check if the work is becoming a burden for the psychic health. [<http://www.igmetall.de/cps/rde/xchg/internet/style.xsl/arbeitszeit-check-2511.htm>, 22.2.2012]. Furthermore, they publish guidelines looking at different aspects of the working life like working conditions, participation, salaries, or equality of treatment, just to name a few.

The health insurances are going even further. One of their topics is workplace health promotion (WHP). Workplace health promotion (WHP) refers to a strategy of action with several analysis and design levels to the levels of "human - organization - work", which aims to strategically and methodically build health resources within the company. Relevant from the methodological point of view here is the application of essential principles of health promotion - such as the principle of salutogenesis by Aaron Antonovsky - to design the "Company".

[Source, http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Betriebliche_Gesundheitsförderung,

wikipedia,
23.2.2012]

That means, health insurances are not only providing information and offering individual analysis regarding sickness figures for single enterprises, but - based on the results - develop special health packages for the company in question.

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The initiative „Inqa“ (Initiative neue Qualität für die Arbeit – initiative new quality for work), is a initiative of federal and the states governments, bodies of social insurance, unions, foundations and enterprises. Inqa is not only offers information regarding work related issues or for special working sectors like office work (e.g. Wohlbefinden im Büro – Arbeits- und Gesundheitsschutz bei der Büroarbeit – meaning as much as „well-being in the office – health and safety standards at work“) but also offers support and help for enterprises e.g. in setting up proper working conditions. [<http://www.inqa.de/Inqa/Navigation/inqa.html>, 22.2.2012]

Summing up this information, it is clear that the topic of workplace culture, and workplace and the influence on ones health, is a well discussed issue not only on an academical level but also by several institutions giving active support. But what is the status quo of work-based training / learning?

The topic of work-based training / learning is an aspect, which has been in the focus of several projects such as ADAPT, Elf3000, Schrittmacher-Oder-Spree or Benchtour.

The initiative ADAPT consisted of several different projects and was focussing on new learning models. Elf3000 (Innopunkt) was trying out new learning models by setting up a learning network between external experts and SMEs. Schrittmacher-Oder-Spree (Equal) developed the Bencheffect-Method which was used again within the EU-project „Benchtour“. The „Bencheffect“ method was specifically developed in order to improve the training methods in small and medium-sized enterprises and it particularly focuses on putting what has been learned into practice as a crucial part of the method.

Work-based training and the discussion involved is nothing really new. But one has to be aware that work-based training also needs certain prerequisites at the workplace which facilitates employees to learn. This is a topic discussed academically and on ministry level. For instance one of the aims of the 19th Innopunkt Kampagne of the federal state Brandenburg was to develop a working environment that is congenial to vocational learning at the work place within companies to integrate low skilled people on a long term level.

The practical experience of the DAA Brandenburg-Ost that took part in this campaign (www.integra2010.de), was that most of the employers (SMEs) contacted were not even aware of the necessity to provide a working environment which facilitates employees to learn, never mind the idea that learning depends on certain prerequisites like a healthy learning environment and does not happen just by enforcing employees to do so.

Missing awareness of this issue might also be the reason for the lack of good practices and strategies for setting up a healthy working environment which facilitates employees to learn.

3. Situation within SMEs

But what is the situation in the SMEs either asked directly or by giving summed up information?

For getting hold of the concrete situation SMEs are facing, SMEs were asked directly using a questionnaire that was developed within the HLS project. Additionally results of a recently carried out internal survey within one of the SMEs working in the educational sector was used. SMEs surveyed were operating in the sectors education, social services and services sector. Within the SMEs the study focussed on those employees working in administration. None of the SMEs is a start-up company. Instead, they are all well established on the market and in the region. The size of the SMEs varied between 50 – 250 employees. The managerial style of the SMEs was said to be collegial and all SMEs do company manpower planning. Furthermore it is possible within all SMEs to take part in formal and/or non-formal vocational training. This takes either place in-house or at a different location. The frequency can not be generalised, and varies from company to company, from monthly trainings up to

trainings taking place less than once a year. Some employees were not sure if the workplace enables them to develop further skills and competences. Which, as a consequence would mean that the workplace is not seen as a place for informal learning. Generally speaking, informal learning is not a real topic yet, and if so takes place mostly by learning by doing.

Not in all SMEs employees can be said to be highly motivated. This seems to depend on the type of work (is this the job I really want or I am just doing it because of the money), the gratification (salary) but also on the already mentioned aspects such as job security, the amount of workload and ones own influence to control it, the influence on the type of work one is doing, stress, time pressure, and the acknowledgement of ones work. These aspects are not only the main hindrance for job-satisfaction but do neither lead to a healthy working environment nor to a workplace which enables employees to continuously learn.

4. Conclusion

Summing up the main results, the following situation can be identified:

Generally speaking, SMEs are well aware of the fact that they need well-trained staff for staying competitive. To achieve that goal, offering trainings (formal or non-formal) is a common means. What is not in the focus so far, is the relevance and the importance of informal learning at the workplace. And since informal learning is usually unintentional on the part of the learner, it means that most employees are not aware of the fact that they are learning. Neither will they be able to pinpoint what they have learnt. And it can be further assumed that most of the employers / managers also can not tell if and what their employees are learning at their workplace. This is a drawback for both sides. So, apart from raising awareness for the aspect and importance of informal learning, one should think of ways to make the content and results of informal learning results visible for both sides.

But before successful informal, non-formal or formal learning / training can take place, SMEs have to provide the prerequisites which enable employees to learn. Which means, awareness has to be raised regarding the fact that learning (especially if the learning result should be sustainable) does not happen under all circumstances just by enforcing employees to do so. Meaning, that aspect like stress, time pressure, job insecurity, missing recognition, just to repeat some of these aspects, influence not only general motivation and health, but also learning and the possible outcomes in a negative way.

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