



SHIFTING OUR PERSPECTIVE ON LEARNING

Why we need to focus on the interplay between jobs, work and learning in the COVID-19 world

As the world looks for a transition to a post-pandemic reality, changes are underway in many European companies. How will these changes shape work organisation, the relationship between employers and workers, and companies' working and learning arrangements in the future?

COVID-19 and social distancing have crashed into the structural shifts brought about by the fourth industrial revolution (6). And while meeting skill needs has been on employers' and policy-makers' agendas for long, investing in people in a more comprehensive way is becoming more urgent: as European economies are picking up speed, the hunt for talent is open.

CHANGES ON THE RADAR

Workplace learning is an important part of the overall effort to equip Europeans with the skills they need in the coming years. To contribute to the continuing upskilling and reskilling discussion, Cedefop and Eurofound joined forces to collect new evidence on work and on skills formation at the workplace, based on enterprise surveys covering all EU Member States.

In their fourth **European company survey**, conducted in 2019 and published in 2020, the two agencies examined how wider pro-employee workplace practices, including skill development, can foster worker motivation, autonomy and wellbeing, and companies' modernisation. They looked 'behind' the skills acquisition and its immediate impact on worker performance.

A follow-up survey, fielded in November 2020, looked at how businesses in Europe were coping with, and responding to, the health crisis. Taken together, the results of the two surveys offer a picture of current changes in skill needs, work organisation, and European employers' changing approaches to train-

(6) The **disruptive technologies** that are part of it, such as the internet of things, robotics, virtual reality and artificial intelligence, are radically changing the way people live and work.

ing. The novel perspective taken by Cedefop and Eurofound has been to focus on how skills are acquired (including in which settings) rather than on which skills are needed and acquired (7).

BOX 1. SOME EXAMPLES OF SKILLS AND OCCUPATIONS ON

THE RISE



Cedefop's **skills intelligence** has been pointing to high demand for advanced science and technological skills, mainly for IT specialists, engineers and researchers (accounting for one in four job ads in 2020). This trend is set to increase up to 2030.

Cedefop forecasts employment in the European healthcare sector to rise by more than 10% by 2030, owing to population ageing. In 2020, demand for healthcare workers soared by 13%, due to the pandemic.

While hospitality and personal services were severely disrupted in 2020 – down by 15% compared to 2019 – they are expected to pick up again, in line with the gradual lifting of COVID-19 restrictions. This is also true for teaching, which changed dramatically in 2020 as it had to go online. However, in the medium and long term, teachers and trainers are forecast to be in high demand.

Cedefop's online job advertisement analysis shows that, in 2020, employers not only looked for more advanced digital skills than in 2019, but also placed more emphasis on skills needed to reshape business and sales models.

Source: Cedefop skills intelligence (Skills OVATE and skills forecasts).

(7) The COVID-19 follow-up survey was conducted online among employers who had agreed to be recontacted following their participation in the 2019 survey. It repeated a range of questions from 2019 to enable comparison, while featuring a set of new questions on the effects of COVID-19 on work organisation, HR policies, and changes in skill needs, training and telework.

BOX 2. THE TELEWORKING BOOM



In 2019, two in three European firms did not have any staff teleworking. At the peak of the pandemic, in April 2020, almost 70% of companies had in place telework arrangements for some or all of their staff.

The involuntary experiment appears to have worked quite well for most companies. Nearly half of the employers surveyed in 2020 are positive about the experience and much of the increase in telework appears to be set to become permanent.

55% of surveyed employers expect the share of teleworking employees to stay about the same in the next three years, while 14% expect a further increase.

Source: European company survey 2019 and 2020 follow-up.

WORKPLACE LEARNING: WIDESPREAD AND ESSENTIAL

According to the 2020 European company survey, in more than half of the surveyed companies, a substantial share of jobs, ranging from 20% to 80%, requires frequent, regular training. The proportion of companies with over 80% of employees in jobs requiring quasi-continuous training is highest in Sweden (28%) and Finland (25%).

Training needs stem from rapidly changing skills requirements in the companies: in 2019, 94% of managers reported that they had to deal with changes, nearly half of them with fast or very fast changes. Changes were most pronounced in financial services (54%) and least in industry (30%). Large companies were more likely to report changing skill needs than smaller ones.

Companies always have two main options to respond to new skill requirements: hiring staff with new skills sets ('buying' skills on the labour market) or developing skills internally ('making' skills). Most financial and other resources allocated to developing skills within businesses concern formal or non-formal learning, and policy-makers have traditionally put emphasis on encouraging it.

Which learning mode dominates depends on the sector: in 2019, training courses were dominant in financial services (31%), learning from colleagues prevailed in industry (47%) and learning by doing in transport and other services (both 20%).

Even if formal training remains important, for many working adults, learning from colleagues in teams and by doing (trial and error) are among the most powerful learning types. Cedefop's 2014 European skills and jobs survey ⁽⁸⁾ showed that such types of learning are the most important driver of skill formation at work: Newly hired workers who engaged in non-formal or informal workplace learning were much more likely to improve their skills significantly than those not engaged in such learning.

THE PANDEMIC, SKILLS AND TRAINING

The 2020 follow-up survey shows that, as a result of the pandemic and its impact on work organisation, in three out of four companies, skill needs had changed further since the previous year. As in 2019, firms providing financial services were most likely to report changing skill needs.

BOX 3. MANAGING A CRISIS – HOW DID EU COMPANIES RESPOND?

In the first year of the pandemic, more than half of businesses continued their activities and one in three was at least able to do so partially. One in 10 was forced to suspend operations completely. Many companies were ill-prepared; less than one in three had a contingency or business continuity plan in place when COVID-19 hit.

The pandemic triggered wide-ranging changes in many European companies. More than 35% said they experienced substantial changes in their core business activities, often coinciding with shrinking employment. Some 87% made changes to their physical infrastructure to comply with COVID-19-related health and safety regulations, and in 83% of companies, restrictions and social distancing measures led to organisational change.

Many service sector companies had to rethink their interaction with their clients or customers. Many employers predict that the changes they made to keep their customers are here to stay.

Source: European company survey 2020 COVID-19 follow-up.

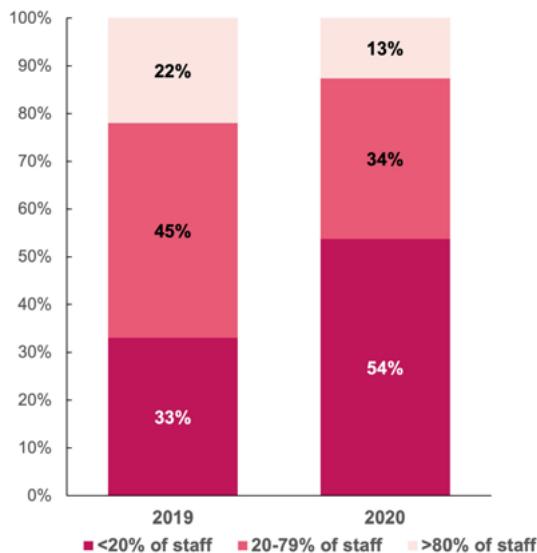
The pandemic and the need for social distancing made it challenging for companies to provide or organise formal training programmes to react to emerging skill needs. The sudden disruption caused

⁽⁸⁾ Cedefop's first such survey was carried out in 2014 in all EU-27 Member States and the UK, addressing about 49 000 adult employees. It examined drivers of skill development and the dynamic evolution of skill mismatch of adult employees in relation to changing task complexity and skill requirements of their jobs.

by lockdowns across Europe in spring 2020 forced many companies to interrupt, discontinue or even scrap corporate training programmes. They needed time to switch to online delivery of training, all the more so as many firms focused on keeping business afloat rather than providing training.

Policy-makers appear to have had a similar focus. Several countries (including Sweden and the Netherlands) included improving employability and training in their COVID responses, but the vast majority of national measures aimed at supporting business and protecting livelihoods ⁽⁹⁾. In the EU as a whole, the overall share of workers participating in training sharply declined: in 2019, around 65% of the surveyed firms provided training to a fair share (20-79%) of their staff but in 2020 this number dropped to 45%.

FIGURE 1. SHARE OF STAFF BENEFITTING FROM EMPLOYER-ORGANISED OR -PAID TRAINING



Source: Adapting business practices to new realities in the middle of a crisis: first findings from the COVID-19 European company survey (Cedefop, 2021).

Boosting overall training participation appears to become less important than supporting the training of employees with specific, often specialised, learning needs. In 2020, 45% of companies reported that social distancing had shifted the pivot of their training strategy in this direction.

ADVANCED AND SPECIFIC SKILLS RISING

The pandemic is having a transformative impact on businesses, with telework, rapid digitalisation of work

processes and high-skilled employment being on the rise. The last of these is not only caused by the growing share of high-skilled occupations, but also by workers upgrading their skills, thus raising qualification levels within jobs.

WORKER GROWTH, COMPANY INNOVATION

Around two-thirds of the surveyed European companies consider training important, giving it priority over work (workload and schedule are adjusted to make time for training), while one-third allows workers to acquire new skills only if the training fits with their workload and schedule.

When asked why they provided training and learning opportunities to their employees:

- 96% of managers said to ensure that workers have the skills to do their current job;
- 84% felt such opportunities were important for improving workers' morale;
- 81% found that they increased employees' capacity to articulate ideas which, in turn, helped improve work processes within the company;
- 70% found they were important to increase worker flexibility to allow for job rotation or employee career advancement.

Beyond the individual benefits training and learning opportunities offer to workers, the 2019 European company survey has revealed a clear positive relationship between workers' learning and wellbeing and firms' corporate performance.

Most recent work by Cedefop and Eurofound ⁽¹⁰⁾ shows that development and utilisation of workers' skills fuels company productivity and boosts their innovation capacity. For this to happen, workers need to be proactive and workplace practices need to be people-centred, giving workers learning opportunities, autonomy and a say in organisational decision-making. Managers play a key role in supporting, nurturing and creating the conditions for learning to occur. The innovation reported by 49% of European businesses in 2016-19 is clearly linked to their capacity to provide such learning-rich work environments. Companies investing in and involving their staff are not only more innovative, but also rank first in radical innovations that are new to the markets in which these companies operate.

UNDERSTANDING LEARNING IN WORK

Formal training is, and will remain, vitally impor-

⁽⁹⁾ See Eurofound's *COVID-19 EU policy watch* (2021).

⁽¹⁰⁾ See Cedefop and Eurofound (2021). *Innovation in EU companies: Do workplace practices matter?*

CEDEFOP'S LEARNING IN WORK SURVEY



Cedefop is preparing the roll-out of a new EU-wide Learning in work (LiW) survey and follow-up case studies in enterprises in all Member States. The survey approaches in-work learning comprehensively, as a process that connects a skill development opportunity or context (a training course, interaction with colleagues, teamwork, a demanding workplace) with skills formation. This project aims to elucidate how work contexts relate to workers' learning (what, how, and how much they learn). LiW also looks at how attitudes, motivations and other antecedents affect learning and how different learning types (formal learning, workplace learning) interact. Shedding light on the immediate and broader benefits of learning will set the stage for policy recommendations that go beyond traditional ones such as opening up formal learning opportunities, funding or non-financial incentives.

Contributing to 'learning and training intelligence', the survey is part of Cedefop's next generation skills intelligence (*). The survey will inform the new EU vocational education and training (VET) and skills policy framework and its ambitious goals. It is fully aligned with Cedefop's strategy and its vision of VET being proactive, excellent and inclusive; serving young people and adults (through up- and reskilling via various learning modes in different settings); providing qualifications at nearly all levels and enabling progression to higher and further education and the labour market.

(*) See documentation of Cedefop's 2021 conference [Getting the future right: towards smarter and people-centred skills intelligence](#).

tant, but we need to look beyond it and give other forms of learning the attention they deserve. Technological, societal, demographic, and environmental megatrends, along with firms' pandemic-induced adjustments, highlight the critical contribution of skills development at the workplace to European companies' capacity to face up to rapid and/or unpredictable change.

To help unlock the potential of workplaces as learning venues, we need to grasp how people learn and to understand what constitutes a learning-conducive work context. Taking a wider perspective on learning requires considering workers' personal goals, motives, interests, attitudes, and preferences. It is the interaction of these factors with a person's work environment and wider social context that shapes his/her learning and its outcomes.

Jobs do not only shape learning: learning also shapes jobs. As employees grow, deepening and widening their knowledge, they often make more of their tasks, which in turn makes their jobs more interesting and motivating. Learning through work and via work is central to fostering workers' and companies' performance and innovation capacity.

The pandemic has contributed to enterprises' awareness of this virtuous circle. In the wake of the crisis, three in five companies (61%) said they focused on creating an environment where employees can autonomously carry out their tasks and manage their priorities. This widely shared goal is very new and very ambitious, given that 2019 survey data indi-

cated that only in 36% of EU-27 firms could a small proportion of workers (less than 20%) organise their work independently.

The 2020 European Skills Agenda states the EU's ambition to provide upskilling and reskilling opportunities for all adults, in formal or non-formal settings, on the job or elsewhere. We cannot achieve this aim without shifting our perspective on learning. A fundamental understanding of the mechanics of learning in jobs, organisations and the world of work more generally is an important stepping stone for European countries to devise learning and skills policies that create a win-win situation for employers and employees.



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