



AN INTERESTING INTERNSHIP

HOW EMPLOYERS' ORGANISATIONS CAN TAKE THE LEAD



DUTCH EMPLOYERS COOPERATION PROGRAMME

PREFACE

SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IS ONE OF THE ISSUES EMPLOYERS' ORGANISATIONS ARE DEALING WITH. ALTHOUGH IT IS AN OCEAN OF CHALLENGES, INSTITUTIONS AND PEOPLE INVOLVED, SKILLS DEVELOPMENT NEEDS A LOT OF ATTENTION. AFTER ALL, A COUNTRY THAT TEACHES ITS CHILDREN WELL CREATES A STRONG BASIS TO BUILD THE FUTURE UPON. LET'S FOLLOW CHRISTOPHE WHO FOUND OUT WHAT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IS ALL ABOUT DURING HIS INTERNSHIP AT AN EMPLOYERS' ORGANISATION.

Federation of
Baslacam
Employers

The Federation of Baslacam Employers

Who is who? Meet the main characters

Christophe	A young student who interns at the FBE
Mrs. Wiseman	Executive Director of the FBE, the Federation of Baslacam Employers
Mr. Welldone	Chairman of the FBE and CEO of the oldest and largest bicycle manufacturer of Baslacam, the BBC, the Baslacam Bicycle Cooperative
Mr. Jack	Owner of BBE, the Baslac Bicycle Experience
Mr. Wheely	Director of HUM Ltd, Heavy Use Mobility
Ms. Rennet	Managing Director of the Baslac Cheese and Dairy Cooperative
Ms. Trap	Chairwoman of the sector organisation CBBS
Mr. Jackson	President of the trade union, UEB
Ms. and Mr. Roundhouse	Owners of a small company that repairs components of windmills
Mr. Wing	A Chinese manager of a large manufacturer of wind turbines
Ms. Quichot	Descendant from an ancient family of traditional windmill operators
Mr. Sprocket	General manager of the Baslac College of Technology (BCT)
Ms. Grease	Department manager of Mechanics, Electronics and Automotive of the BCT
Samantha	A student of the Baslac College of Technology who interns at the BBE

Abbreviations

BBC	Baslacam Bicycle Cooperative
BBE	Baslac Bicycle Experience
BCT	Baslac College of Technology
BEP	Baslacam Educational Platform
BNIS	Baslacam National Institute for Statistics
CBBS	Cooperative of Baslacam Bicycle Specialists
FBE	Federation of Baslacam Employers
HUM	Heavy Use Mobility
TVET	Technical Vocational Education and Training
UEB	The United Employees of Baslacam

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HOW IT ALL STARTED

As a student of Economics and Business at the Baslac University, Christophe was looking for an internship. He was particularly interested in labour market issues. Therefore, his professor advised him to approach the FBE, the Federation of Baslacam Employers. Although, until then, Christophe was not very familiar with the work of employers' organisations, he became excited when he visited the website. FBE represented the private sector of the country. Some large companies like Basfood and the Baslac Energy Company Ltd were direct members. But the majority of the membership consisted of dominating economic sectors, like Food processing, New Energy and Manufacturing. Christophe knew what he had to do. He wrote an application letter to the Executive Director, Mrs. Wiseman. It didn't take long for her to respond. After two days Christophe received an invitation letter to meet at the FBE headquarter in the centre of Baslac.



ABOUT BASLACAM



Christophe lives in Baslacam. An emerging country with a tropical climate. Baslacam has 23 million inhabitants, called Baslaci, of which nearly 60% is younger than 25 years. The population growth rate is close to 3%. The capital Baslac, with 3 million inhabitants, has the most important harbour of the region. Goods from the three neighbouring countries have to pass through this harbour. Therefore the transportation sector is well developed, although the quality of the highway and railway networks is rather poor. Other sectors with good perspectives are; Cheese production, Windmill Management and Bicycle manufacturing. These sectors have a history of centuries.

Baslacam is known around the world for its tasteful hard goat and sheep cheese products, both for direct human consumption in the business-to-consumer sector and for industrial processing. Windmills are traditionally used to pump the water away from low lying areas, to grind grains and to power automatic saws. This last technology allows the Baslaci to increase the production of wood for constructing wooden houses. One can therefore easily understand that the construction sector has a long history of craftsmanship as well.

DOING A LOT OF GOOD WORK

Christophe had to wait five minutes for Mrs. Wiseman to arrive. She welcomed him and offered him a cup of coffee. “Tell me Christophe, why do you want to intern at FBE?” Christophe was prepared for that question and he answered right away: “Our country has a lot of challenges Mrs. Wiseman. Technology is changing rapidly and it is a real challenge for employees in our traditional sectors to keep up with these developments and acquire new knowledge and skills. Schools for vocational education offer curricula which are not always up-to-date. I think that an employers’ organisation is the best place to analyse the problems, to study the causes in-depth and to define recommendations”.

“I fully agree Christophe”, Mrs. Wiseman replied. “Our traditional economic sectors do have the potential to grow. But new competencies become more and more important. The lack of new competencies among both employees and new entrants hinders this growth. I am convinced you can do a lot of good work spending a four month internship within the FBE. So, you can start next Monday. Congratulations!”.

ABOUT COMPETENCIES




Christophe was thrilled about the idea of getting started at the FBE. He couldn't wait to get prepared. That is why he started to do some desk research. He found some really interesting studies of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the World Economic Forum and the World Bank. They proved that foreign investments had been done in the food processing industry, especially in cheese production and in windmill management. Furthermore he discovered that a Dutch bicycle manufacturer recently merged with a cooperative of traditional Baslacam bicycle manufacturers. He wondered what the objectives were of these investments. But he could guess that it should be a mixture of innovation, low cost production and market expansion. A national labour market study of the Baslacam National Institute for Statistics (BNIS) showed that the number of new entrants in the labour market was five times bigger than the number of new jobs created.

“New competencies are becoming more and more important. The lack of new competencies among both employees and new entrants hinders this growth” is what Mrs. Wiseman had said. Christophe decided to study some theories about didactics to find out what was meant by ‘competencies’. He learned that this is about knowledge, skills and attitude. Knowledge is what you can learn by heart. Like learning a series of words in another language. But even if you know a lot of words by heart, this doesn't mean you are able to actually speak the language. The same goes for technology like repairing and maintaining a cheese production process installation. You can learn a lot about valves, crimp-fittings, stainless-steel and pumps, but if you don't get the chance to detect technical defects, disassemble components and assemble spare parts, you will not be able to develop these skills. Skills are expressed by verbs. They tell what you actually can do with the knowledge you obtained. Attitude is about the personal values and responsibility one demonstrates while sharing objectives with other team members or colleagues. It is about behaviour. Does a colleague show up on time? Does he help his team mates when they need him? Does he organize his toolbox in such a way that others can easily find the tools they need? And, perhaps even more important; does he show respect for others?

Christophe concluded that -although everybody was using the term ‘skills development’- it would be better to talk about ‘competence development’. He was satisfied and felt he had made the first steps to start doing his internship at the FBE!

A FORCEFUL HANDSHAKE



That Monday morning he was the first to arrive at the FBE headquarter. Mrs. Wiseman showed up soon afterwards. “You are lucky”, she said. “Today we have a Board meeting. And I have asked the chairman, Mr. Welldone, to meet you and identify your research questions”. “That sounds great to me Mrs. Wiseman”, Christophe answered. “This meeting allows me to explore different points of view”. “You are right Christophe. Mr. Welldone is CEO of the oldest and largest bicycle manufacturer of Baslacam, the BBC. Which stands for Baslacam Bicycle Cooperative. He knows a lot about this economic sector and about the rapid changes which are currently taking place all over the world”.

Mr. Welldone was a vital personality in his sixties. He introduced himself with a forceful handshake. “You must be Christophe? Well, it is my pleasure to meet you and to welcome you at the FBE. The companies in my sector are suffering from a lack of competencies and the employers’ organisation should do something about it. Complaining is not enough. We first have to find out what really goes wrong”.

“I agree with you Mr. Welldone”, Christophe answered. “Before defining my research questions, it would be very useful to question some decision makers in your sector. Like company owners of SME’s and production managers. Would that be possible?” “Well Christophe, I think that is a very good idea. After all, you can study a lot of scientific reports, but if you are not familiar with the day-to-day life in our companies, it will remain abstract. I will draw up a list with names of people who will be more than happy to answer your questions and give you information”.

ABOUT THEORY AND PRACTICE

A few days later, Christophe went to his first interview by bike. Fortunately, most of the bicycle manufacturing companies were located in Baslac. So, he could work very efficiently. His first meeting was at a small company called BBE Ltd. The owner, Mr. Jack, told him that BBE stands for Baslac Bicycle Experience. “I started my own company about 15 years ago. I had 10 years of experience with BBC. That is how I got to know Mr. Welldone. I decided to start my own company and got specialized in very solid bicycles for multi-purpose use. BBE is employing 15 technicians. Because we only have one single plant and we sell our products mainly in Baslac, they are responsible for manufacturing and repairs”.

“I see”, Christophe said. “What kind of vocational education do they have?” “Let me see”, Mr. Jack responded. “Most of them finished the local college for mechanics. But after starting to work with BBE, they need at least three months to acquire the right skills”. “Is the school offering a poor educational level?” Christophe asked. “I wouldn’t say it is poor. The teachers are quite good actually. But they only teach from books. The students hardly have the opportunity to apply in workshops what they have learned in theory. The school only has two or three old welding torches. They are not familiar with the materials we are working with. Like light weight metal parts and composites. So, even if they had very good grades, new employees need the time to get acquainted with the materials and the tools we use. Fortunately, some of our workers are very experienced and have a lot of patience. So, they help their new colleagues”.



LIFELONG LEARNING

“That sounds very satisfying to me. Mr. Welldone however told me that you do have some serious problems with regards to skills development. Could you tell me something about that?” “Yes, it is not only the fact that schools for vocational education do not possess modern equipment and tools. The innovations that take place in our sector force us to get acquainted with them.

For example, nowadays our customers ask for electronic bikes. Our workers don't have the skills to design such a bike, nor to assemble the motor. BBE is part of a cooperative of bicycle manufacturers, the Cooperative of Baslacam Bicycle Specialists (CBBS). The CBBS recently merged with a Dutch manufacturer, 'De Fietskeizer'. They are now exploring the possibilities to produce bicycles in our plants for both local market and for export purposes. Our workers are not ready for that. I just return from a trip to the Netherlands at their invitation. Workers not only need knowledge about mechanics and electronics. ICT is becoming more and more important as well. The batteries collect information about the energy they use, their actual power availability and even about the need to be replaced or repaired. This 'big data' has to be read by a laptop. So, it is not only the new entrants we have to train. My current employees need to update their knowledge and skills as well. If not, BBE cannot keep up with new developments. We might lose our market position.” Christophe thanked Mr. Jack for his information and promised to share with him a copy of his final report.



RAPID TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS



Christophe was impressed by his first company visit. He understood that rapid technological innovations require new competencies from employees. But at the same moment, curricula in colleges should go hand in hand with these developments. Are teachers able to keep up with these developments? That was what he was wondering about when he returned to the FBE headquarter.

Mrs. Wiseman understood that Christophe had more questions than answers after this visit. That is why she told him to go and meet Mr. Wheely, the director of a large company called HUM Ltd. This stands for Heavy Use Mobility. His bicycles were known all over Baslacam and used by professional bike riders to transport fruit and vegetables from the farmers' location to local markets and the food processing industry. HUM Ltd was a member of CBBS as well.

TEAMWORK AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

“We are definitely the most innovative bicycle manufacturer on the continent”, Mr. Wheely claimed when he shook hands with Christophe. “Welcome in our company. What can I do for you?” “Thank you for your time Mr. Wheely”, Christophe said. “I wonder if your employees can keep up with new technological developments. I understand innovation goes fast and that you can only maintain your market position, or even grow, if they have the right competencies”.

“Well my young friend. Please tell me first what you mean by competencies”. “Ah, I can imagine you ask that question. People are used to talking about ‘skills development’. But actually, we need to separate between knowledge, skills and attitude. Because the mix of the three of them determines how people perform in their job. Together we call them ‘competencies’. That is why I’d rather talk about competencies and ‘competence development’ than ‘skills development’”.

“Thank you Christophe. That makes sense”, Mr. Wheely agreed. “But there is more to it than that. If people have the right competencies they still have to work together with colleagues to achieve team results. Therefore, I would like to tell you about team development. Our company -HUM Ltd- employs 250 people. We distinguish a whole series of departments. Like design, engineering, manufacturing, sales, customer services, spare parts and repairs and -of course- the management of which I am in charge. We consider the people working in a department not just like a group of people, but as teams”. Christophe showed he was interested and indeed wanted to know more about this approach. “A team is so much more than just a group of people. The members share the same objective, they have complementary skills -I am sorry- competencies, they participate actively to achieve their common goals, respect each other and use interpersonal skills to communicate and perform”. “What exactly do you mean by ‘interpersonal skills’ Mr. Wheely?” Christophe asked. “Those are the skills you use to communicate in a clear way and to involve your team members. ‘Listening’ might be the most important interpersonal skill. Another one is asking questions.



We can ask open questions. They are quite general and allow you to start a conversation. Like; 'what do you like about our country?' But, once you get more to the point, you can ask closed questions. Only one answer is possible. Like; did you replace the front wheel? The answer can only be a yes or no. Other important interpersonal skills are 'summarizing', 'convincing with arguments' and 'showing respect'. If people cooperating in a group use these skills in such a way that productivity and efficiency improve and $1 + 1$ makes more than 2, then we speak of a team. Sometimes interpersonal skills and communication are called soft skills. But, to be honest, I think they are essential for constructive teamwork and therefore I don't like the word 'soft'. They are as important as the competencies you are interested in."

NEW BUSINESS MODELS

Christophe understood that the bicycle manufacturing sector was going through a lot of rapid changes and developments. “What do you think about the future of your sector Mr. Wheely?” “Well, that question is not easy to answer. But I think that HUM Ltd will shift slowly from a purely manufacturing company to a service organisation. In the future people might no longer own a bicycle but use them on demand. We will develop applications that can be installed on smartphones. The app will show the availability and locations of our advanced bicycles all over the country. The user can just walk to the closest one, use it to go from one place to another and leave it at its destination. Remote sensing will allow our control centre to identify which ones need maintenance or upgrade. This approach will turn our business from manufacturing into service orientation. You can imagine that a totally new business model requires totally different competencies.”



TRANSFERRING AND EXCHANGING KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCES

Christophe had to think this over. He understood that vocational education and lifelong learning were no easy processes to design and carry out. The teamwork Mr. Wheely was referring to not only had to do with teams within HUM Ltd, not even only between teams within HUM Ltd, but with cooperation with the CBBS and the Dutch company as well. After all, technological aspects were exchanged which allowed HUM Ltd to innovate its products. But this meant that employees should learn how to work with new technologies. How could HUM Ltd manage?

Mr. Wheely explained: "The cooperation between the Dutch company 'De Fietskeizer' and HUM Ltd is very good and intensive. Our department managers have paid a visit to the Dutch plant. During that study visit they received an initial training which introduced them into the most modern technology. Like the application of batteries in bicycles and the use of software to read and interpret data. Two Dutch trainers spent a few weeks with our employees to conduct several training programmes. And don't forget: not only the Dutch specialists teach us. Our new Dutch partners have learned quite a lot themselves as well from our production employees about how to reduce the number of disapproved products. While working together on the job. After all, we are used to working with limited resources. And you know what we achieved? We now offer low cost standard electronic bikes to our home market. Just imagine. A lot of agricultural products are transported by bike from the source to the marketplace or to industry. The cyclist carries over 150 kilogrammes of products on his back. Like bananas. This means that he has to walk uphill and that his speed downhill can easily reach 70 kilometres an hour. A lot of unnecessary road accidents happen yearly in Baslacam. Our newest model, the Basic BD Power Control, delivers extra power support going uphill and limits the descending speed at 25 kilometres an hour. That is what we call product innovation by cooperation and teamwork!"

WORKING IS LEARNING

So, people in companies can learn from each other on the job and by designing and carrying out training programmes. Teamwork and communication are essential to perform and lifelong learning is a must. Christophe took the time to work out his notes. He thought he started to understand.

After visiting 5 companies that were all part of the CBBS, Christophe had a good impression of the whole picture. The sector had a long history. Internal market was growing and product innovation was needed. Better products increase export opportunities. The whole business model might even change into a service oriented sector instead of purely manufacturing. Better adjustment of curricula in schools for vocational education was necessary to prepare young people for labour market competence needs. These curricula should even shift constantly together with rapidly changing technology. Therefore teachers' knowledge should be refreshed on a regular basis. Employees needed continuous learning programmes to keep up with technological developments. Cooperation with similar companies in other regions -worldwide- was an opportunity to improve quality, innovation, productivity and efficiency.



PARTICIPATION OF MEMBERS



“Well then”, Mr. Welldone concluded when he was having a meeting with Mrs. Wiseman and some staff members of FBE. “Christophe, we think you made a good start exploring the importance of competence development. Actually, we now already see some opportunities to take action ourselves and design a programme to bridge the gap between the curricula of technical vocational education and labour market competence needs. Of course, we cannot do all that by ourselves. We will need the support and active participation of our members. Together they offer a lot of up-to-date knowledge and expertise. I just wonder how to get this organised. So, we propose that your main research question is: *‘what can an employers’ organisation do to achieve sustainable improvements in the field of competence development?’* “

Christophe nodded his head to confirm. This assignment felt a little bit like a heavy load on his shoulders. After all, such an important issue meant a lot of responsibility as well. Mr. Welldone understood that he should coach Christophe by cutting the main research question into digestible chunks.

“I suggest you first start to find a method to analyse the skills gap which is perceived by employers. I have already made an appointment for you at the Baslac Cheese and Dairy Cooperative. It only takes you 20 minutes on your electronic bike to get there”.

PROTECTIVE AND HYGIENIC CLOTHES

Christophe was impressed by the looks of the factory. He was warmly received by Ms. Rennet, the Managing Director of the company.

“We employ 2.000 people in this plant. But we do have five more plants in other provinces of the country. Overall, we employ over 6.000 people. Our company produces pasteurised milk, buttermilk, milk powder and all kinds of cheese. The milk products are sold locally in Baslacam. But 70% of the cheese products are exported to more than 40 countries worldwide”. Indeed, who doesn't know the famous Baslacam cheese products?

Christophe was offered a guided tour of the whole factory. Before entering the production facilities he had to wash his hands and put on security shoes, protective glasses, earplugs, a hair net, a helmet and a hygienic warehouse coat.



All the operators were wearing these protective and hygienic garments.



TACIT KNOWLEDGE

“Just look around”, Ms. Rennet said. “You will notice that we do have some old equipment in one production hall. But we recently invested in new process installations which you can see in the second hall. Our operators have to be all-round. Because we produce 24 hours a day, in three eight hours’ shifts. The same goes for the technicians who have to repair the equipment, if necessary, and replace spare parts. But of course it is better that they carry out preventive maintenance”.

“What exactly do you mean by preventive maintenance, Ms. Rennet?” Christophe asked. “Let me give you an example. Our senior technicians are very familiar with the old equipment. When they hear an irregular sound, they know what’s wrong and they make sure the problem will not occur again. Now, that is what we call preventive maintenance based on tacit knowledge. By being very experienced, they know what to do in order to make sure that the equipment doesn’t fail, even if they are not able to explain exactly why. But making sure that our newest installations do not fail is much more complex. They have to be able to analyse data that appear on control panels, reset and program software and communicate with the original equipment manufacturer. Furthermore, they have to understand the basics of the applications. Which means cheese and dairy production, hygienics and cleaning”.

AWARENESS OF DEVELOPMENTS



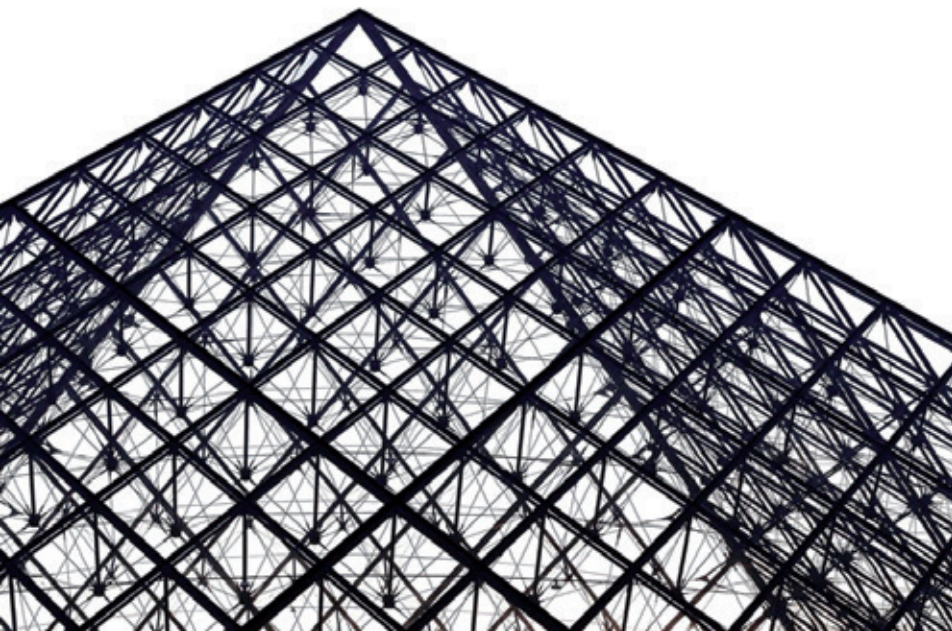
“That is a lot Ms. Rennet” Christophe concluded. “How long does it take for new entrants to be able to replace a senior colleague?” “Now, that is a really interesting question Christophe. It takes them months if not years. A few weeks ago, we organised a meeting with people from Bracfood, a large company involved in all kinds of food products, and four other companies in the food sector. We concluded that we should work together with schools for vocational education. Because the teachers and students are hardly aware of what happens in modern companies and factories. Don’t forget, we are talking about all kinds of dairy products, bread bakeries, canned vegetables, meat processing and more. But that’s not all. We need employees who understand about food, technicians, operators and so on. Ideally, all in one. We understand perfectly well that that is not possible. But we do think that we can help colleges to adjust curricula more to what we need. And to adapt every now and then in line with rapid developments. Therefore, we tried to develop a method to analyse the gap of skills. Or, should I say competencies?”

Christophe was very much interested in the results of the meeting Ms. Rennet was talking about. That is why she invited him to the follow up meeting, which took place only two days later.

FUNCTIONS, TASKS AND COMPETENCIES

“Welcome everybody”, Ms. Rennet said. “I would like to introduce you to Christophe. He is an intern at the BFE and he wants to find out everything about competence development and vocational education. From the point of view of employers, that is”. Seven people sat together and discussed the question how to analyse the skills gap. One participant proposed: “We should draw up a list of functions that are really crucial”. “I agree”, Ms. Rennet answered. “Let us first brainstorm and identify at least ten functions. Next step will be to select a short list”. The participants to the meeting were excited. Because they found out that, although they sometimes were producing rather different products, they were looking for the same kind of functions. Like preventive maintenance technicians, system operators and product developers. That was their short list.

But what could be the next step? Christophe decided to share his ideas: “Perhaps we can first define the most important tasks preventive maintenance technicians, system operators and product developers have in each of your companies. Then we can conclude if there are sets of general tasks which are part of these functions, regardless the company the employees are working in”.



The group got more and more enthusiastic and dived into the exercise the way Christophe had suggested. And they got even more enthusiastic when they found out that it was rather easy to list three to five dominant tasks. “We can conclude that there are more similarities than differences in what they do. Now, let us go to the final step. That is to describe the competencies that are required for every task”. Although this was quite some work and the participants needed to discuss a lot to agree upon the competencies, Ms. Rennet was very happy when she could wrap up the meeting.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I am convinced we have found a structure to analyse the set of competencies that go together with functions. This afternoon we identified three important functions. We defined the main tasks and we listed the knowledge, skills and behavioural aspects which are needed. Thanks to Christophe! With this picture in mind we can discuss to what extent competencies are needed for new entrants, experienced employees and experts. That allows us to identify the skills gap. Excuse me, the competencies gap”.





FOCUS GROUPS

Conference facilities, Red Rock Resort, Gorkhi-Terelj National Park, Nalaikh district. Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia

Mrs. Wiseman was lost in thought when Christophe knocked at her door. “Please sit down Christophe. I just had a phone call from Ms. Rennet. She explained how she and her colleagues managed to work out a simple but efficient structure to analyse the gap of skills. And that you made a significant contribution to that. I am just wondering if we can organise focus groups in other sectors as well. It is obvious that we have to do a lot of work. But the results will allow us to share our knowledge with teachers, Boards of colleges, the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders”.

“I think you are right Mrs. Wiseman”, Christophe confirmed. “I suggest we invite the directors of ten companies in the windmill sector. If we manage to do the same analysis, we will be able to define an improvement programme with them. It could be a step towards concrete action”. “I agree Christophe”, Mrs. Wiseman said. “As a part of your internship, I ask you to take the lead”.

SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



Two weeks later they were all there. Ms. and Mr. Roundhouse, owners of a small company that repaired components of windmills. Mr. Wing, a Chinese manager of a large manufacturer of wind turbines. And Ms. Quichot who descended from an ancient family of traditional windmill operators. They were accompanied by a group of colleagues who were active in the same sector, mainly in manufacturing and maintenance of windmills.

“Welcome everybody” Christophe opened the meeting. “It is my pleasure to spend the afternoon with you identifying the main challenges with regards to skills development in the windmill sector and to define solutions that BFE can initiate”. A series of interesting discussions followed and at the end of the afternoon Christophe could conclude: “The sector is moving away a little bit from traditional applications like pumping water, grinding grains and powering mechanical saws. More and more windmill technology is applied to generate green energy which is distributed not only in Baslac. It even reaches the outskirts of the country which allows people in low developed rural areas to have access to electricity”.

“That is true Christophe”, Ms. Quichot confirmed. “Until a few years ago, poor farmers cooked their meals on little fires, often in the corner of their cabins. This was not very efficient, bad for personal health and for the environment. Now cheap energy and continuous availability of electricity allows them to apply all kinds of electronic devices and equipment. The expertise to construct wooden solid houses now has reached them. Quality of life has increased and new jobs were created because new economic activities have been developed”.

“So innovative windmill technology brings prosperity” Mr. Wing continued. “But it is extremely important that our colleges for technical vocational education and training teach the right skills. The Technical University of Baslac should do the same. We don’t want to depend on foreign companies and experts only. When technical innovation and product development is done by our own companies and engineers, our economic growth will be more varied and sustainable”.

“I agree” Ms Roundhouse reacted. “We should not forget to transfer traditional knowledge and expertise. But in addition we will definitely have to teach modern issues like aerodynamics, power generation, energy storage and distribution”. “Not to forget digital skills, networks, big data and the internet of things” her husband added.



THE MAIN STAKEHOLDERS

“So the sector needs engineers, all-round technicians, mechanics and specialists in various fields” Christophe summarised. “What can the employers’ organisation do to modernise the educational system?” Mrs. Wiseman stepped forward. “I think I can give an overview of the main stakeholders involved. That is in the first place the government. The Ministry of Education is responsible for education policies. The most important body is the BEP. That is the Baslacam Educational Platform. This institution defines the curricula and exams which are mandatory at every school throughout the country. The BEP consultants talk to the management of companies every now and then, but they have to cover all economic sectors. So meetings with decision makers in the windmill sector are not frequent. By the way, the same goes for cheese production and bicycle manufacturing. Then we’ve got the schools themselves. If we focus on technical colleges and universities we are talking about five important leading colleges and one university. The management and teachers depend on the learning outcomes which have been defined by the BEP. They are allowed to teach additional items, but this is on top of what has been defined and mandatory. So, this doesn’t leave them much time. Besides that, teachers don’t have many opportunities to upgrade their knowledge. In fact, they hardly meet with specialists in companies. And then we are talking about the companies in the different sectors. We are sitting around the table now and I am convinced that you expressed very well the developments in your sector. But in fact, this is the first time we could reveal the problems of skills development related to the windmill sector. Not to forget about the same exercise we did with representatives from the food processing sector. And Christophe has gathered quite some insights with regards to bicycle manufacturing”.

When Mrs. Wiseman ended the meeting they all felt they had made an important step forward in managing their common challenge.



ON THE WAY TO CONCRETE ACTION

“Please allow me Mrs. Wiseman” Christophe asked. “Am I right that FBE is representing a lot of companies in the private sector and therefore is the voice of business? You now have a lot of information available about problems and causes. Couldn’t you share this with the Minister of Education?”

“Yes Christophe, you are right. We can put this issue on the strategic agenda of FBE and discuss our worries and concerns and even complaints with the Minister. But our messages would be so much stronger if we would share them with the trade unions and define possible solutions we agree upon as well.

Apart from that, I would like to set up a concrete project, see it as an experiment, with a group of member companies, to bridge the gap of skills ourselves. I am thinking of additional practical training in one of the sectors you have been analysing. Just to show that employers themselves can be part of solution. But we didn’t reach that stage yet”.

Mr. Welldone, who just entered the conference room, had heard the last sentences of Mrs. Wiseman. “Well Christophe” he said with a smile. “I see that the next challenge of your internship has just been described”.



COMMON INTERESTS

Mrs. Wiseman, Mr. Welldone and Christophe sat together to discuss the possible scenario's to take the next step. "I suggest we focus on the bicycle manufacturing sector to start with. They are well-organised in the CBBS and the individual companies are increasingly experiencing the lack of competencies ", Mr. Welldone said. "That seems like a good idea to me", Mrs. Wiseman answered. "I know the chairwoman of the CBBS, the Cooperative of Baslacam Bicycle Specialists, Ms. Strap pretty well. We graduated together at the business school about twenty years ago".

"I agree", Mr. Welldone added. "And I know she has a good relationship with Mr. Jackson, the president of the trade union". "What is the name of the trade union Mr. Welldone?", Christophe asked. "As you know we have several trade unions in Baslacam, Christophe. But the largest one is the UEB. The United Employees of Baslacam. They represent 35% of the workers, especially in industry. The other trade unions often follow the policy of Mr. Jackson. The UEB and the FBE have common interests with regards to labour market policy and competence development. Companies need well-educated and trained employees and workers need growing companies to guarantee employment. I am sure Mr. Jackson will be prepared to discuss a project in this field with us".



RESPECTING THE RULES OF THE GAME

A few days later, Mr. Jackson was at the FBE headquarter. He and Mr. Welldone were talking about some elementary issues like minimum wages and the age of retirement. Ms. Strap arrived only ten minutes later, thus completing the key persons for that moment.

“Well Christophe”, Mr. Welldone started the meeting, “you proved that in the bicycle manufacturing sector we have some severe challenges. One of the steps to bridge the skills gap is to set up a project in which the companies cooperating in the CBBS join forces. Do you have any suggestions what we can do to make this concrete?”

“Thank you Mr. Welldone”, Christophe answered. “I have thought this over and over again. I think companies should give input to TVET schools on a regular basis about their changing competence needs. Establishing an advisory board might be a sustainable way to do so. At the same time these companies should offer internships to students, allowing them to get practical training. A guaranteed number of internships can be a valuable contribution to the learning process as part of the curriculum”.

“I am not sure if I agree”, Mr. Jackson reacted. “Until now, internships basically have been cover-ups for cheap labour”. “This might be true Mr. Jackson”, Ms. Strap said, “but if we can define what a well-structured high end internship is about, I am sure I can convince our companies to respect the rules of the game”.

Mr. Jackson nodded thoughtfully.

“Christophe, can you work out a project proposal which I can use to inform the CBBS companies and to ask for their cooperation?” Ms. Strap asked.

“It is my honour, Ms. Strap, to do in-depth research on the issue of internships and how to organise them. It will not take more than a week”. “That is challenging Christophe”, Mrs. Wiseman said. “But you will have your own workstation at our office which allows you to focus”.



EVERYBODY A WINNER

And a challenge it was. Christophe studied a great number of articles on issues like formal and informal learning, setting learning goals, learning on the job and so on. The most difficult part of his assignment was to set up a concept which would have added value for all parties involved; the company, the student and the school.

His main thought was; ‘how to make everybody a winner?’ The last day of his research he managed to create a proposal and a presentation to inform the working group.

“Welcome everybody”, Christopher started the meeting. “It took me some time to put all the pieces of the puzzle together, but I think I made the right decisions. At least I am ready to share my insights and thoughts with you”.

“Well, we are interested and curious at the same time Christophe”, Mr. Well-done said. “Go ahead!”. And so he did.

CREATING A LEARNING CULTURE

“I was told that students have theoretical knowledge, but they cannot gather practical experience due to a lack of equipment, materials and tools in the schools. These means are available in the companies of the bicycle manufacturing industry. On the other hand the companies need well-educated employees and they have experienced people on board. So, internships might be the answer to the need of getting companies and schools involved with each other.

But, to make this work, a few conditions have to be made for the development of high end internships. The first one is the most difficult one. That is to create a learning culture in the company”. “That is interesting Christophe”, said Ms. Strap. “What exactly is a learning culture?” “Well, at least the management of the company should be convinced that learning and development of individual competencies is crucial for the team results and company performance and therefore part of the company’s human resource strategy. It is too easy to say that everybody learns while working. It is true that people learn on the job, but an involved management makes sure that learning is not just a coincidence but a controlled process. This means that learning goals are concretely set in terms of competencies. These learning goals are discussed with the learner and his supervisor. The learner can be a student but an employee as well. While working and trying out new things, employees can sometimes make mistakes. They are not punished for that but, instead, these mistakes are evaluated in such a way that one learns from it”.

LEARNING COACHES, LEADERSHIP AND VISION

“So”, Mr. Jackson concluded. “A learning culture is the first condition for internships. I suppose a learning culture doesn’t just happen. One has to develop it. Now, I am curious to know what the second condition is”.

“You are absolutely right Mr. Jackson. Developing a learning culture requires leadership and vision. Therefore, the second condition is to appoint learning coaches in the company. These are experienced employees who are more or less all-round and know the networks and regulations of the company. And what is more; they like to guide other people in their learning process”.

“Are learning coaches paid for that task?” Ms. Strap asked. “Well, that depends. Being appointed as a learning coach can be perceived as a compliment and recognition in itself. But some companies see this task as a special responsibility and general extension of tasks and therefore define the combination of being an expert and learning coach as a separate function.



AN INTEGRATED DIDACTICAL CONCEPT



The third condition to define internships is to set up a learning path following an integrated didactical concept. This means that the starting situation of the learner is clear, learning goals are defined in terms of competencies and the way to achieve these goals is described. In order to know the starting situation of the student, the learning coach has to be acquainted with the curriculum of the TVET school and the results and ranks of the student.

Assignments which are part of the learning programme should neither be too easy, nor too difficult. The timeline is described in terms of milestones. These are evaluation moments where the learning coach, a teacher from school and the student discuss his progress. In my opinion, a high end internship is a responsibility from the school, the company and the student and therefore requires frequent interaction between teachers of the school and the learning coaches of the company”.

REFLECTING IMPORTANT PILLARS OF THE ECONOMY

“Let me congratulate you with this concept Christophe”, Mr. Jackson said. “If this is the way companies work out internships, I will, as representative of the employees of Baslacam, support and encourage it. I am convinced that this kind of internships increases the chance for new entrants to find a job, either in the company that offered the internship, or in another company. After all, if the bicycle manufacturing sector is in the lead other companies will be convinced that quality is guaranteed”.

“Thank you Mr. Jackson”, Ms. Strap answered. “And I can imagine if the CBBS companies guarantee a certain number of internships each year, the school management and the Board will be more than happy to admit the input of an advisory board of the bicycle manufacturing sector”.



“I am excited to take action on this idea”, Mrs. Wiseman admitted. “We will start with an experiment together with the CBBS and share our experiences with the food processing and new energy sectors. If things turn out well, we can upscale the number of companies, placements and students involved. If the food processing and new energy sectors can be represented in the Advisory Board, they perfectly reflect important pillars of our economy towards the school”.

ACHIEVEMENTS COULD BE SHARED

The meeting had been well prepared. Mrs. Wiseman and Ms. Strap had organised a meeting with all the members of the CBBS. Among them were Mr. Jack of the BBE Ltd. and Mr. Wheely of HUM Ltd. Mrs. Wiseman presented the concept which had been developed by Christophe. On the PowerPoint presentation she had added the logos of the FBE, CBBS and the trade union UEB.

Mr. Jackson himself was present as well with some of his colleagues. Obviously, for the attendants it was clear that the concept of offering high level internships in return for influence in curriculum development of TVET schools was supported by important organisations. Their impact would not only be restricted to this particular small scale project. Achievements could be shared with other economic sectors and with the government. It might even be a game changer if employers' and employees' representatives together could convince the Minister of Education and Employment that vocational education could be organised hand in hand.

But "first things first" Mr. Wheely said. "I think it is a good idea to develop structural cooperation between the bicycle manufacturers and a regional school for technical vocational education and training. And I am prepared to offer five internships every period. But shouldn't we involve the school management right from the start?"

"You're absolutely right", Mr. Jack continued. "As a small enterprise I can only offer one internship. And I will be the learning coach myself. But it would be useful to invite the management of the BCT, the Baslac College of Technology". "That makes sense", Mr. Welldone added. "I will make an appointment with the BCT shortly and discuss our proposition".

CHANGING THE CURRICULA MIGHT NOT BE EASY

A week later Mr. Welldone and Christophe entered the Baslac College of Technology. They were warmly welcomed by Mr. Sprocket and Ms. Grease.

“Welcome, Mr. Welldone and Christophe. I am Mr. Sprocket, general manager of the College. I am happy to introduce to you Ms. Grease, who is the department manager of Mechanics, Electronics and Automotive. I understand you wanted to talk about internships?”

“That is correct Mr. Sprocket”, Mr. Welldone answered. He introduced Christophe and explained the process they were going through. “If I am right the companies that are organised in the CBBS are prepared to guarantee a certain number of placements for interns every year?” Ms. Grease summarised.

“That is correct” Christophe said. “I think that this offers students the opportunity to put into practice what they have learned at school in theory. They will be connected to a learning coach who is an expert. And this learning coach will meet the teachers on a regular basis. By offering a didactical concept the internship will be part of the learning process. The internship programmes can even be embedded in the curriculum.”

“I am very happy that the bicycle manufacturing companies are prepared to offer and guarantee internship programmes” Mr. Sprocket concluded, “but changing the curricula might not be that easy. After all, we depend on the directions of the BEP, the Baslacam Educational Platform. It is the governmental body which follows the policy of the Ministry of Education. They tell us what we have to do. These curricula are fixed, just like the exams. But nevertheless, I propose we start with a pilot of ten students in four companies. It is very interesting for our students if they can work with up-to-date equipment and learn from experts. Our teachers might benefit as well”.

MAKING THINGS CONCRETE



“Thank you for doing this meeting together Christophe” Mr. Welldone said. “I must admit that this is the first time I met with the management of the Baslac College of Technology. It is clear to me that the management and the teachers do not have a lot of opportunities to get acquainted with companies and to follow the rapid changes they are experiencing. Besides that, they completely depend on the instructions of the Baslacam Educational Platform. I understand why the skills gap is widening”.

“It is my pleasure Mr. Welldone”, Christophe answered. “I am very happy to intern at FBE. It is true that I have learned a lot at the university. But participating and contributing to developments in practice makes everything very concrete. And that is what I want for the students at the Baslac College of Technology as well. They can learn a lot while working at BBE with Mr. Jack as a learning coach or at HUM Ltd. with one of the technicians of Mr. Wheely as a learning coach”.

“I agree Christophe. Let’s make this happen!”

COMMON OBJECTIVES

A few weeks later ten students of the BCT were working in the workshops of several bicycle manufacturing companies. The learning coaches had decided to set-up a programme which contained the same elements for each student. Like applying advanced welding technologies, assembling electronic devices and applying composites to form components. This allowed them to exchange experiences and to involve teachers.

Mr. Jack was coordinating the shared intern programme so the learning coaches could learn from each other as well. After four weeks of running the programme, Ms. Grease visited the companies together with three teachers. “Good morning Mr. Jack”, she said’. “I hear that one of our students, Samantha is doing her internship at your company, BBE, and that she managed to assemble a whole new bicycle?”

“That is true Ms. Grease. Samantha is extremely curious and diligent. We are a small company and this allowed her to learn and take the lead in every step of the manufacturing process”. Ms. Grease and the three teachers followed Mr. Jack to the final assembly hall and met with Samantha. “How are you doing Samantha?” one of the teachers asked. “I am doing fine teacher”, Samantha answered. “Although I knew about several composites, I now have been able to work with them and to experience their typical properties. Assembling and connecting the electronic support engine was completely new for me, but I have worked on five bicycles together with Mr. Jack and now I know how to deal with this challenge”.

The teachers asked a lot of questions to Mr. Jack and Samantha who could reveal a lot of recent innovations in bicycle manufacturing processes. Finally Ms. Grease concluded; “These internships have a high added value for our students and our school. In order to guarantee the pilot will progress successfully, I would like to invite Mr. Jack, Mr. Wheely and Ms. Strap to compose a sounding-board as a representation of the CBBS. These three teachers and I will represent our school. Our common objective is to improve and upscale the internship programme and finally, to update parts of the curricula and reduce the gap of skills with the companies”.

INITIATE MAJOR CHANGES

Mrs. Wiseman, Mr. Welldone and Christophe sat together to evaluate the developments. “I am very happy that you delivered the building blocks to connect the Baslac College of Technology to the bicycle manufacturing sector in a structural way Christophe”, Mrs. Wiseman said.

“That is too much honour, Mrs. Wiseman, but I am sure that FBE as an employers’ organisation is the right actor to initiate major changes in the field of competence development, more in particular to reduce the skills gap by connecting the private sector to the educational system. The Cooperative of BCT and CBBS is very concrete. Some companies already indicated that they want to offer structural jobs to some of their interns. Ms. Grease offers the opportunity to her teachers to spend some time working in the CBBS companies to get acquainted with new technologies and Mr. Jackson is exploring the possibilities to make equipment in the companies available from time to time for lifelong learning opportunities”.

“You are absolutely right Christophe”, Mr. Welldone said. “Next step will be to upscale the pilot by involving the Cheese production and Windmill sector. It shouldn’t be too difficult to convince the decision makers about the win-win-win concept.

THERE IS ONLY ONE PLACE TO MAKE THIS WORK

Only three weeks later the project had been expanded with internships at the Baslac Cheese and Dairy Cooperative, Bracfood and various Windmill companies. The managers sat together to discuss their impressions. They were all there; Ms. Rennet, Ms. and Mr. Roundhouse, Mr. Wing, Ms. Quichot and of course Mr. Jack and Mr. Wheely.

“I think this concept contributes to the availability of new entrants with better competencies when they enter the labour market” said Mr. Wing. “You are right”, Ms. Rennet agreed, “and we are welcome to reinforce the sound-board of the BTC! This will have a positive influence on the interaction between our sectors and the school”. Mr. Wheely nodded.

“But there should be a way to use the learning infrastructure we developed in favour of lifelong learning for employees. And we will have to come into contact with the Baslacam Educational Platform. Our work would be much more easy and necessary changes would be implemented smoothly when they understand the relevance of our work”. “I agree” Mr. Roundhouse said. “There is only one place to be to make this work”. And they all confirmed: The Federation of Baslacam Employers!



MAIN LIST OF TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS STORY

- High quality internships offer students the opportunity to apply their theoretical knowledge into practice
- Worldwide technology changes rapidly. Curricula in schools cannot always keep up with those changes
- Before drawing conclusions about a skills gap, it is good to make an analysis of problems and causes
- Curricula do not always go hand in hand with fast technological developments
- Employers' organisations are able to analyse gaps of skills because their members have up-to-date knowledge regarding competence needs
- Companies and TVET schools should cooperate in order to reinforce each other
- If all stakeholders are involved, the chance to be successful will increase significantly
- The main stakeholders for competence development are the government, schools and employers
- Concrete actions, however small, can be more convincing than academic theories
- Internships might be the answer to the need of getting companies and schools involved with each other
- High end internships increase the chance for new entrants to find a job
- Internships allow students to put into practice what they have learned at school in theory
- Employers' organisations can make things happen by taking the lead!

EXTENDED LIST OF TAKEAWAYS FROM THIS STORY

- High quality internships offer companies and non-profit organisations the opportunity to obtain up-to-date knowledge and to have access to schools and universities
- Emerging countries often do have a young population due to high population growth. The agricultural sector often dominates the economy. Related sectors might offer growth opportunities
- Companies and economic sectors that have the potential to grow need employees with competencies that answer these needs
- Labour market is about both new entrants and existing employees
- Their competencies are composed of knowledge, skills and attitude
- International reports are helpful, but regional and sectoral surveys are more concrete
- Schools do not have the equipment to gain practical experience
- New employees need time to get acquainted with specific technology of experienced colleagues
- The developments and application of new technologies such as materials and ICT are fast
- Even relatively simple products are becoming increasingly complex and require lifelong learning from employees
- It is not easy for teachers to keep up with fast technological developments
- A team is much more than just a group of people. The members have the same objectives, complementary competencies and participate actively
- Using interpersonal skills guarantees team performance
- Big data, digitization and smart applications lead to new business models
- Manufacturing, preventive maintenance and smart services are more and more integrated
- People learn from each other by exchanging knowledge and experiences
- People learn in the workplace while performing tasks and getting feedback from others
- Involving members and applying a structural method is required to conduct a skills gap analysis
- Respecting safety rules are a must for both employers and employees
- Respecting safety rules is part of a very important competency: working attitude!
- Tacit knowledge is related to a lot of experience and is valuable

- Tacit knowledge alone is not enough to be prepared for future developments and competence needs
- Even very complete curricula cannot meet all competence needs of companies
- Functions have tasks. Tasks can be performed if a number of competencies are there
- Even if the companies are different, some functions do have quite some tasks and thus competencies in common
- Technology is developing constantly in almost every sector, just like the applications. Employers can identify these changes in an early stage
- School for vocational education are the key to (sustainable) economic growth and employment
- Frequent and constructive interaction between the main stakeholders is necessary to define, upgrade and adjust curricula on a regular basis
- Sharing insights and statements with trade unions makes messages towards the government much stronger
- Employers' organisations and trade unions often have common interests
- Social dialogue is more effective than emphasizing endless disputes
- Companies should give input to (T)VET schools on a regular basis about their changing competence needs
- At the same moment these companies should offer internships to students which allow them to get practical training
- Competence development is about the question; 'How to make everybody a winner?'
- A major condition is to create a learning culture in the company
- Developing a learning culture requires leadership and vision
- The second condition is to appoint learning coaches in the company
- The third condition is to set up a learning path following an integrated didactical concept
- A high end internship is a responsibility from the school, the company and the student
- The concept of offering high level internships in return for a say in curriculum development of TVET schools will be supported by important organisations
- Achievements can be shared with other economic sectors and with the government
- The internship programmes can be embedded in the curriculum
- Sharing challenges and objectives encourage to cooperate and share solutions
- Once a start has been made every next step will be more easy to take!

Colophon

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