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## Back to the future: Apprenticeships that work

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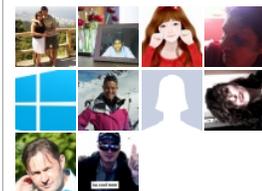


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Are apprentices the answer to Europe's economic woes? As youth unemployment rises and Europe's competitiveness wanes, both employers and governments are looking to expand apprenticeship programmes, which combine classroom training with on-the-job experience.

Many European countries already have some form of work-based learning. But BusinessEurope, which represents employers' federations in 35 countries, last year called on more European governments to establish the highly effective "dual-learning systems" used by Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark and the Netherlands. In dual systems, educators and industry jointly design curricula, and vocational education in the classroom alternates with significant practical training at a company.

The European Commission is now developing guidelines for more effective apprenticeship programmes as part of a Youth Employment package (http://tinyurl.com/c4rgyp8) proposed on 5 Dec. And the UK government has taken up the call as well: in January it extended the Apprenticeship Grant for Employers programme that provides grants of around £1,500 (approx. €1,700) per apprentice for small businesses that train people age 16 to 24.

However, some experts are concerned that the rush to create more apprenticeships could dilute and undermine their effectiveness. In a recent report for the UK government, entrepreneur and educator Doug Richard called for an improvement in the quality of apprenticeships and a greater focus on the needs of employers. "Apprenticeships need to be high-quality training with serious kudos and tangible value both to the apprentice and the employer," he said.

Large companies, particularly in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector, have a strong interest in ensuring that apprenticeships do lead to a significant improvement in the skills of young people. The European Commission estimates the number of digital jobs in Europe is growing by 3 per cent each year, but the number of new ICT graduates and other skilled ICT workers is shrinking. The Commission says Europe now has 700,000 unfilled ICT jobs.

Information technology companies are responding with dedicated programmes. Microsoft, for example, has launched a new global initiative called YouthSpark, which aims to develop partnerships with governments, non-profit groups and other companies to create training and employment opportunities for young people around the world. The target: to connect 300 million young people around the world to opportunities for employment, entrepreneurship and education. In the UK alone, Microsoft plans to place 4,000 apprentices with its business partners, such as systems integrators and software developers, through its new "Get On" programme.



"In the IT industry, there are opportunities," says Harsha Gadhvi, community affairs manager, Microsoft UK. "It is one sector that can put its hand up and say, 'We do have jobs.'"

### Computing skills as foundation

There is a growing consensus that the best way to address the skills shortage in ICT is to use apprenticeship programmes to combine formal training in computing skills with actual on-the-job experience. Microsoft Germany and its business partners are running training programmes that aim to prepare 450 apprentices for jobs over the next three years around different themes. Each business partner says how many trainees it would like to hire and Microsoft proposes candidates for them to choose to hire.

Microsoft also designs the training course and partly funds the programme.

Over a year, trainees for sales positions receive 50 days training, and trainees for consultant roles 70 days. "We want to keep our business partners skills up-to-date," says Daniela Reher, Project Lead for the Microsoft Partner Talent Gap Initiative. "The lack of skilled labor is growing dramatically." The number of open IT positions in Germany has more than doubled in the past three years to 43,000 in December 2012, according to BITKOM, Germany's industry association for IT, telecoms and new media.

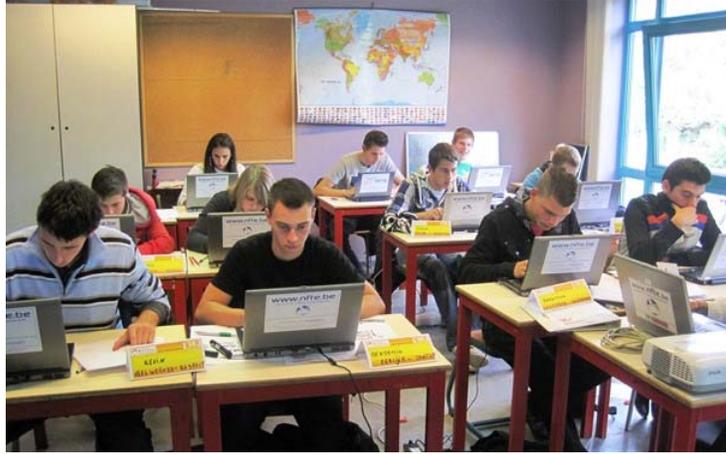
Widespread access to the Internet means it is now possible for most Europeans to use online tools to test their own IT skills and pinpoint their weaknesses. This self-assessment approach is far more cost-effective than formal classroom-based evaluations. Following an endorsement from German Chancellor Angela Merkel and considerable media coverage, 3.2 million people in Germany have taken Microsoft's online IT test (http://www.schlaumaeuse.de/), which provides personalized feedback designed to help the individual improve their employability.

And it's never too early to start learning. Microsoft Germany also supplies software packages to schools to help them improve IT security, pupils' media literacy and safety on the Internet. In November 2012 in Berlin, Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer launched a new version of Microsoft's popular German kindergarten education software Schlaumaeuse (http://www.schlaumaeuse.de/) (clever mice) for its new Windows 8 operating system. "It is focused on language skills, which are the key to everything else," says Simon

Liepold, corporate affairs coordinator with Microsoft Berlin. "The latest version is cloud and touch-screen based....and has already had 4,000 registered downloads."

#### Building entrepreneurship skills

Of course, not all young people want to work for a company. Some want to be entrepreneurs, and run their own business. In Belgium, Microsoft is one of a group of large companies supporting the Network For Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) (<http://www.nfte.com/>), a not-for-profit group that helps young people who have dropped out of school, are unemployed or are from disadvantaged backgrounds. "In one family, there may have been several generations who haven't seen what it is to get up every morning for a job," says Lena Bondue, Director of the NFTE Belgium.



Young people during an NFTE course

During the nine-day courses run by the NFTE, participants develop a business plan for a project of their liking. "It could be to do with scooters, music, ICT or whatever they choose," says Bondue. At the end of the course, trainees present their business plan to a jury of volunteers who then provide feedback on improving their presentation, communication and IT skills. "Most of them have smartphones and Facebook, but ICT is considered fun. They don't often use it in a professional way," says Bondue. "We teach them to think about how ICT can help you address the challenges in a business and work with Word and Excel documents in a professional way."

For the NFTE and similar non-profit organizations elsewhere in Europe, tapping the expertise within private companies is just as important, if not more important, than securing funds. As well as providing funding, software, laptops and advice, Microsoft staff volunteer to be guest speakers on the NFTE training courses, they sit on the juries that evaluate business plans and they act as coaches to NFTE trainees who go on to start their own business.

Experts say that such courses and apprenticeships need to give trainees both the soft skills and the practical skills they will need to thrive in the commercial world. "On a NFTE course, trainees learn how a company functions, the different costs involved, how to find new customers and the importance of building relationships with clients," Bondue says.

Of the 4,000 young people who have been through the NFTE courses, 59 per cent have a job, 12 per cent have gone back to school and 11 per cent have started their own business. Bondue says the new businesses started by the alumni include a company offering new security mechanisms for music festivals and a coffee shop where you can order your favorite brew via Facebook.

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