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Supporting Apprentices' Autonomy in Vocational Training – Insights Into the Practices at the Swiss Post

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Abstract

The notion of autonomy is increasingly emphasized in VET. In this paper, we address how companies and vocational trainers can respond appropriately to this vital, basic psychological need. Based on examples from a qualitative study conducted at the Swiss Post we discuss measures meant to support autonomy in apprentices. We clarify the notion of autonomy and its crucial connection to human motivation by reviewing some of the supervising methods of workplace trainers and provide information about training measures by which the Swiss Post affords autonomy-support for its apprentices.

Keywords

learning cultures, workplace training, autonomy of apprentices, coaching, participation

1 Introduction

People's need for autonomy plays an important role in human motivation and development (Vallerand et al., 2008). This need refers to the need for self-organizing and self-regulating behaviour according to one's own values and commitments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Companies, who show honest concern for their employees' need for autonomy, establish work conditions, under which well-being and agency flourish (Deci et al., 2017). In positively affecting job-engagement (Chen et al., 2018), knowledge sharing (Foss et al., 2009), and creativity (Wang, 2016), autonomy-support potentially yields long-term benefits for companies (Preenen et al., 2016).

Concerns for autonomy are of vital importance in the context of vocational training. Autonomy-support by supervisors facilitates socialization within organizations by contributing to the satisfaction of newcomers' basic psychological needs (Chong et al., 2020). The stance of socializing agents especially matters for apprentices as they enter work organizations in Switzerland at early adolescence. At this developmental stage, maturing teenagers have – due to the biological, cognitive, and social changes they are undergoing – an increasing desire for autonomy, the satisfaction of which is critical to their healthy psychological development and adjustment (Patall et al., 2019). In being supportive for apprentices' autonomy, VET thus can make a valuable contribution to adolescents' successful and healthy development.



In this paper we address how companies and vocational trainers can respond appropriately to this vital, basic psychological need. By providing examples from a qualitative study conducted at the Swiss Post from August 2019 to September 2020, we intend to contribute to the discussion around providing more autonomy to apprentices in VET. We will clarify the notion of autonomy and its crucial connection to human motivation by reviewing some of the supervising methods of workplace trainers. In addition, we provide information about training measures, by which the Swiss Post affords autonomy-support for its apprentices.

2 Theoretical framework

Research based on Self-Determination Theory shows that the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (BPN) is critical to human motivation and flourishing (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The BPN for competence, relatedness, and autonomy, represent innate and “life-span tendencies toward achieving effectiveness, connectedness, and coherence” (Deci & Ryan 2000, p. 229). This means that persons have a need for experiences of having an effect on their environment and for achieving desired outcomes within it (competence), as well as for love and care, for feeling connected to relevant others, and for being loved and cared for (relatedness). Furthermore, human beings have a need for autonomy, i.e. for experiences of “volition and self-direction in thought, feeling, and action” (Legault, 2016, p.1). The satisfaction of these BPN contributes to a healthy psychological development and well-being, whereas their frustration has converse consequences (see Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). The literature suggests that at least in work contexts, support for autonomy plays a key role, since with their autonomy supported employees would find ways to have their other needs satisfied too (Deci et al., 2017). As we will argue in this presentation, VET can actively contribute to the satisfaction of all three BPN, when it provides a structured guiding that facilitates experiences of autonomy for learners. By referring to the positive effects of BPN satisfaction, we illustrate the importance of supporting apprentices’ autonomy in this way.

3 Method

Between September 2018 and June 2019, a comprehensive explorative case study was conducted at the Swiss Post. The main goal of the study was to inquire about the attitudes, values, and beliefs regarding apprenticeship training, understood as learning culture, of all stakeholders involved. One of the research questions was about the experience of autonomy of apprentices as well as about institutional enablers. In total, 12 apprentices, 19 trainers and coaches, three employees responsible for the apprentices’ vocational education and two managers were interviewed by means of a semi-structured interview guideline. Data were processed using a qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2016).

4 Findings

Three topics related to the support of autonomy have been identified: a) opportunities to take ownership, b) choice and participation concerning learning activities, and c) experiences of having a voice.

a) *Opportunities to take ownership*: The Swiss Post grants every apprentice up to three hours a week, which they can use for studying their VET-related materials during payed working time. During these hours, apprentices must be present, but they can decide autonomously how to use these personal hours of study. They can do their vocational school’s homework, prepare exams, or work on some of the learning tasks they receive at their training place. The responsibility over the organization of these hours lies with the apprentice, and one is expected to take the initiative to use this offer. However, the latter does not always work well, as one vocational trainer told us:

Our apprentices are allowed to study up to 2 hours per week on paid work. (...) Although we always communicate this to them, they don't take it up sufficiently. And so, I always have to tell the apprentices that the Post is a mother company, that they are really giving time to learn, and that it is paid for. (20200121_1Berufsbildner_Logistik, Pos. 46-48)

This may indicate a lack of interest in theoretical learning on the part of some apprentices, leading them to feel less motivated for using their reserved time for studying, even if they receive bad grades at school. In some cases, this vocational trainer tries to overcome the lack of initiative by making individual, binding arrangements concerning the use of personal study hours together with the respective learners. Another trainer offered his apprentices personal support in learning. One apprentice reported that she has been asked:

Can we help you? Do you need support somewhere? Because we have learning time in the company... and we could also learn together with you. That's no problem at all. (20191111_1Learning_FKD, Pos. 190)

However, we found some variance in the handling of learners' study hours by vocational trainers between training places. Especially some logistician apprentices reported that they cannot realize all their study hours every week and always must ask their trainers before actually taking them. This indicates that this offer is not equally implemented throughout the whole enterprise. Nonetheless, some apprentices reported that they receive a lot of time for studying during payed work time, and that they highly appreciate this offer.

In sum, we see this affordance as a small-scale measure to allow apprentices to experience responsibility, initiative, and ownership, as long as apprentices receive an appropriate level of leeway and support by vocational trainers in organizing their study hours autonomously. Another example to be addressed under this rubric is how apprentices work in so called learner teams, for example when they run an entire post office. Here the amount of autonomy granted requires a large amount of responsible acting from apprentices and sufficient trust by their supervisors.

b) *Choice and participation concerning learning activities*: There is various approaches to be addressed, such as having a say in determining what to learn, which is especially the case in the ICT profession and the possibility to choose what to do with one's further education budget. It includes that one may decide what kind of laptop to buy with the budget allocated to each learner.

c) *Experiences of having a voice*: As part of the Kaizen philosophy, the Swiss Post lives a companywide culture of welcoming inputs of its employees, in which its apprentices are involved. Managers and vocational trainers told us that they invite apprentices explicitly and repeatedly to bring in their ideas, if they see something they would like to change. Through a union-like institution, which until 2020 has been called "Insieme"¹ (Italian for "together"), apprentices at the Swiss Post have a voice concerning matters that directly affect them. In annual meetings with some regional training managers, apprentices can influence some aspects of their apprenticeship through their representatives. Every learner is potentially available for election for the role of a representative of his or her profession, and/or region, who then serves as a speaker for those who elected him or her.

¹ As we discuss later, this institution is currently undergoing some changes including the search for a new name.

Overall, there is a range of measures in place which successfully support autonomy at the workplace, because it is a highly ranking competence within apprenticeship training. Currently not each apprentice has access to the same measures, because conditions differ widely between the 16 apprenticeships. The success of the various measures further depends on how they are interconnected and orchestrated and how coaches support the realization of learning goals, including acting autonomously and responsibly. Not least, the attitudes and beliefs of coaches towards their learners and their capabilities as well as the level of trust given to them are decisive parameters for achieving action competence and active participation as the ultimate goal in an apprenticeship.

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Biographical notes

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