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Sitting on the Fence: Adapt or Import? - A study on Training Activities of Foreign Multinationals in Germany

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Abstract

Even though Germany has been an attractive location for foreign investors for many years and foreign subsidiaries in Germany create a significant number of jobs on an intermediate qualification level, whether and how these foreign companies act regarding training at their German locations is largely unknown. Therefore the paper asks the question how multinational companies, which are socialized in differing skill-formation systems, practice training in their subsidiaries in Germany, where the German dual apprenticeship system is predominant. The focus lies on multinational companies from France, Japan and the United States, as these countries are significant in terms of direct investments in Germany and as the selection follows a ‘most different design’ regarding their respective skill-formation system. Qualitative methods, i.e. expert interviews and a qualitative content analysis, were used in order to adequately reflect the explorative approach of the study. Using neo-institutionalist organisational theory, the study first examines how companies act in the area of training and recruiting on the intermediate skill level and second how they are influenced by the two different country environments. The differing training practices of foreign multinational companies in Germany are presented, and the influence of environmental conditions on adaptation towards local practices is discussed.

Keywords

training practices, foreign subsidiaries in Germany, multinational companies, German dual apprenticeship system



1 Introduction

Germany has been an attractive location for foreign investors for many years and foreign subsidiaries in Germany have created a significant number of jobs (GTAI, 2021, 2022; KPMG, 2018). As these subsidiaries are often active in marketing and sales, business services or production and research (GTAI, 2022), they have a high demand for skilled workers on an intermediate qualification level. This demand can be met by recruiting already trained skilled workers, by participating in the German dual training system or by creating their own training programmes. Due to the growing shortage of skilled workers on an intermediate qualification level in the labour market in Germany, offering apprenticeship positions in these fields could be an important opportunity for foreign subsidiaries to generate skilled and loyal long-term employees that meet their demand.

However, whether and how these foreign companies act regarding training at their German locations is largely unknown (Lorscheid & Pilz, 2017). Existing studies focus instead on cases of German companies abroad. They analyse how German dual practices are transferred and how they contribute to the qualification of employees in the respective host countries (Gessler, 2017; Li et al., 2019; Pilz & Wiemann, 2021; Wiemann & Pilz, 2020) The paper at hand turns this question upside down by asking:

How do multinational companies, which are socialized in differing skill-formation systems, practice training in their subsidiaries in Germany? Do they adapt to the German system and offer apprenticeship places or do they ‘import’ practices from their country of origin?

2 Research design

The questions are answered for multinational companies from France, Japan, and the United States. These countries are significant in terms of direct investments in Germany (GTAI, 2021). Moreover, this selection follows a ‘most different design’ regarding their respective skill-formation system (Pilz, 2012, 2016; Zenner-Höffkes et al., 2021), as the common practices in their home countries do not only differ from the dual training system in Germany but also among each other based on Pilz's typology (Pilz, 2016). Training in the US can be described as liberal because vocational education and training is decentralised and individually organised in the private sector with a practical ‘learning by doing’ approach and a focus on specific work tasks (Barabasch & Rauner, 2012; Pilz, 2009; Zenner-Höffkes et al., 2021). Even though also in Japan each company carries out its own training without the involvement of the state, the training there is often extensive and not exclusively aimed at becoming commercialised (Pilz & Alexander, 2020). The system in France is strongly influenced and financed by the state and training takes place in vocational schools (Brockmann et al., 2008; Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Pilz & Li, 2014). The focus in this study lies on the ‘intermediate skill level’ (Ryan, 1991) and includes dual apprenticeships as well as dual study courses, as they are of major importance within the German system of VET and higher VET. In the dual training system in Germany, young people spend about two thirds of their training time, which in total usually encompasses 2.5 to 3.5 years, in the company. This in-company training is curricular interlinked with classes at vocational schools, where the remaining third of the training takes place. In addition, besides the state, also chambers, employers' organisations and trade unions take care of aspects like financing, organisation, certification, curricular design and teaching staff (Bosch & Charest, 2008; Fürstenau et al., 2014). Dual study courses are also characterised by the combination of theory and practice and take place in cooperation between companies and polytechnics (Fachhochschulen), vocational academies (Berufsakademien) or universities at a bachelor's degree level (Deissinger, 2000; Hofmann et al., 2020).

The study mainly focuses on greenfield investments, as it can then be assumed that the German education system was new to the companies when they arrived. For those companies included in the study, which acquired existing German companies, a retrospective look was taken.

3 Theoretical approach

In the sociological neo-institutional approach, companies are regarded as open systems. They are in exchange with their environment and can only be regarded within this environment (Scott, 2003, 2014). Organisations, in this case foreign companies, are consequently influenced by their environment. In the field of training in Germany, they enter an environment, which is largely shaped by the German dual training system and, as described previously, differs significantly from the environment of their countries of origin.

Different elements of institutions (regulative pillar, normative pillar, cultural-cognitive pillar) shape the training environment in their country of origin and in Germany (Kostova et al., 2008; Scott, 2014; Stavrou et al., 2021). Every institution is based on these pillars, but not all three dimensions necessarily have to be found at the same time (Scott, 2014). Elements from the three pillars can also be identified for the VET sector, which then form the institutions and thus the institutional environment. The regulative pillar represents explicit and sanctionable rules. One example are laws and requirements, like training regulations in Germany, that companies must obey if they offer dual apprenticeships (BIBB, 2017; Pilz & Fürstenau, 2019). The normative pillar includes norm- and value-based role behaviour as well as moral obligations that arise from these norms and values. These social obligations are reflected, for example, in the idea of how training should be designed and what the 'right' behaviour of actors is. This behaviour includes, for example, the aspect that companies engage in training and thus enhance their reputation (Fürstenau et al., 2014). The cultural-cognitive pillar is characterised by values. The importance of certain degrees and their value can be cited here as an example. In Germany, for example, the inter-company recognised certificate is attributed a high value as a symbol of completed training (Clement, 1999; Pilz, 2019).

In summary, it can be said that companies are caught in the tension between the German environment on the one hand and their home country's environment on the other. In order to act effectively, organisations must adapt their training strategy accordingly (Garavan et al., 2020; Paauwe & Boselie, 2003) to ensure legitimacy under conditions of this institutional duality (Kostova & Roth, 2002). Using neo-institutionalist organisational theory, the study consequently examines how companies act in the field of training and recruiting on the intermediate skill level and how they are influenced by the two different country environments.

4 Methodology

Qualitative methods were used to adequately reflect the explorative approach of the study. The findings presented are based on more than sixty semi-structured interviews with experts in foreign companies in Germany and thirty interviews with representatives of regional stakeholder organisations, such as chambers, business development agencies and vocational schools, all located in Germany. Small, medium-sized, and large foreign companies were included in the analysis, whereby the subsidiaries predominantly employed more than 20 people and had a maximum of 1,500 employees. Due to assumed different levels of familiarity with the German training system, both young and longer-established companies were considered. Two main approaches were used to find the specific companies: an initial selection was made via a database with data on direct investments (fDi Markets) and further companies were identified through a web search to cover both unknown, smaller companies and important foreign firms.

The interviewed experts in the organisations were individually selected based on their knowledge (Meuser & Nagel, 2009). Depending on the structure of the companies, experts responsible for training and/or recruiting skilled workers (e.g., subsidiary managers, training managers, HR managers) were selected. While most of the interviews were with one interviewee, there were also individual interviews with several interviewees. Most of the interviews lasted about one hour.

Qualitative content analysis has been used for the interpretation of the fully transcribed interviews to ensure a deep understanding (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019). By inductively forming categories from the material, the different activities of the companies were identified. In addition, on the basis of the theoretical approach by Scott (Scott, 2014), environmental conditions influencing the subsidiary in their decision were identified as initial explanatory approaches for the training activity.

5 Results and discussion

Overall, the results show a spectrum of different training practices and indicate how companies from differing skill-formation systems behave in the institutional training context in Germany. The data revealed mainly three different practices that foreign subsidiaries use to meet their needs for skilled workers. All three activities could be found in foreign companies from all three selected countries of origin, and thus, the type of training practiced cannot be explained by a company's headquarter location. Additionally, there is no evidence of extensive importing of training practices from their home countries.

Dual training in the subsidiary

The first solution is to offer dual training and partly additional dual study courses. In these cases, the demand at a medium qualification level for young skilled staff is mainly covered by the company's own dual training activity. In many companies during annual planning, the training places on offer are adapted regarding occupations/study courses and number according to current and future needs of skilled workers. Some companies offer additional in-company training, on top of the general training plan prescribed by training regulations to support the apprentices. Furthermore, in some cases companies also offer training in cooperation with the headquarters in the home country. In some rare cases an exchange with the headquarters is planned or, which is more common, training on company-specific aspects like production processes as well as safety standards or corporate values.

Recruitment of trained professionals

Other companies do not provide comprehensive initial training (neither in the dual training system nor in any other form) but rather cover their demand for skilled workers on entry-level positions by recruiting different groups of applicants. The trained professionals either hold recognized vocational qualification or a university degree, often at a bachelor's level. The already trained professionals are then, with induction, directly employed in positions for (junior) professionals. While some companies prefer a bachelor's degree, others deliberately search for professionals with a vocational qualification. Furthermore, individual companies explicitly include either degree as a requirement in their selection process as they see both paths of prior qualification as equivalent.

Own training in the subsidiary

In individual cases, the interviews revealed a third activity. Some exceptional companies provide extensive training (mainly on-the-job) in the company outside of the dual training system. For these companies the previous education of applicants is either irrelevant or it is even important for them that the junior staff do not yet have extensive previous knowledge in this field or experience in other companies. The comprehensive training, some of which lasts for years, is planned exclusively in the company.

Most companies used more than one practice to meet demand of skilled workers in the different divisions of their subsidiary and in the case of short-term needs. For an initial overview, companies were assigned to the practice category that they predominantly used to cover their needs. Figure 1 presents the three different practices and gives an overview of the results.

Figure 1

Practices to meet the demand of skilled workers.



Referring to the research question if companies adapt to the local practices or import their own training culture, it can be stated that the majority of subsidiaries (around two thirds) adapts to local practices by offering extensive dual training themselves and therefore being an active part of the German dual training system. Some companies also partly adapt by recruiting the professionals trained within the German system or with a university degree (around one third) While some companies use comprehensive training outside of the German system additionally to dual training, only a few company use this practice as the main strategy.

Based on the findings generated in this study, no significant differences of companies' choices regarding mainly used training practice based on country of origin could be found. However, individual aspects, such as the extensive training of rather inexperienced junior staff in a Japanese company can be interpreted as indications of a proximity to the practices in the home country in this individual case. This result corresponds with the findings from interviews with regional actors, such as vocational schools and chambers of industry and commerce. Apart from individual anecdotes, the German experts in chambers and vocational schools report no differences to German companies.

Some companies which are not involved in dual training yet, consider setting up their own dual apprenticeship or dual study courses as an option for the future. Most companies plan to provide initial training in the future if a correspondingly large demand can be expected. In other companies, no training is planned even in the long term. They hardly define needs at the skilled labour level and predominantly require specialists. Unskilled workers, on the other hand, play only a subordinate role in the subsidiaries. A closer look at the companies reveals that - in addition to technical and work process-related needs - age and size play the largest role. These critical factors influencing training commitment have also been identified in other studies (Fuchs et al., 2021; Fuchs et al., 2022). One interviewee summarized this process as follows: *'I think we are still a bit too small [...]. For us, one employee is already a bigger factor. That's why we don't have one [apprentice] yet, but that's certainly a question of time.'*¹ (U026/J).

The wide-ranging adaptation of foreign companies' training practices to the German environment found in the data may indicate a strong influence of the local environment. A clear influence of the local environment was also shown for German companies operating abroad in different destination countries (Vogelsang & Pilz, 2020). The particular environmental conditions that might influence adaptation will be considered in the following section.

Influence of environmental conditions on adaptation towards local practices

When planning to start training activities, the decision was always first initiated, discussed, and reviewed in the German subsidiary. In none of the interviews, concrete specifications on the design of initial training at the intermediate qualification level from the home country are mentioned. Overall, the decision-making autonomy regarding training activities is particularly high compared to other areas in HR and HR managers, who are generally German-socialised, often choose dual apprenticeships and sometimes also dual study courses as a suitable solution. In some companies, training and recruiting is ultimately carried out in line with the forms of training common in Germany, but it was found that there is a more extensive consultation with the parent company in the home country, which made different understandings apparent. Here, the duality is evident in the form of influences from the parent company, but also from the German local environment and institutions, which are based on the three different pillars - regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive - of an institution according to Scott (2014). In Germany, interview partners often emphasised the regulatory pillar (such as laws regulating the training of young people) and some of those companies that do not offer training themselves mentioned it as a hurdle to offering apprenticeships. Frequently mentioned are e.g. the influence of a works council (Betriebsrat), regulations regarding the scope of content to be taught or the ordinance on trainer aptitude (Ausbildereignungsverordnung). However, in addition to the predominantly regulatory pillar, the social obligations also become clear, for example, the idea of a company offering high quality training as a societal contribution *'[...] I wish for every company in Germany that training is a matter for the boss, that they really say: it is a high social responsibility to invest in the education of young people'* (U037/U). This focus on social responsibility may be based on the assumption that a certified qualification is important for young people in Germany but possibly also on the calculation that it would lead to a good prestige of the company. Another German interview partner emphasised *'[...] we train our own skilled workers [...] when they are finished, they are not only skilled workers, but can also be directly employed by us, because they know our processes, they know our factory [...]. These are really perfect candidates that we have trained.'* (U041/U) Thus, it becomes clear that the interviewees have a conception of 'good' training, how companies behave within the framework and the meaning of associated symbols.

¹ Quotations are translated in English by the authors.

Some influences from the home country specifically on the strategy of training / recruiting of young professionals manifest in the form of regulatory requirements for the subsidiary. Often found are fixed parameters regarding HR budget and/or the headcount. But there are also societal perceptions about training behind the decision on the involvement in the training of young professionals. For example, social obligations influence which role of companies in professional training is perceived as correct. HR managers in Germany do not always share the same understanding with decision-makers in the home country: *'The only thing I can say is that vocational training is completely foreign to them and that we have to fight every time it comes to issues like budgets. Because [...] (French colleagues) are not aware [...] that vocational training costs money at the first moment but is only profitable at a later stage.'* (U038/F). As shown in this example, the interviewee interprets the different understanding of colleagues in the headquarters for as an influence from the French environment. The reason behind could be the long-term nature of the investment in training, which is unusual for some other countries. Further experienced differences in the institutional environment mentioned were for example the different valuation of an apprenticeship compared to a university degree as well as and the understanding of an occupation.

The influences reveal different elements of the pillars of institutions, some of which are interrelated in a complex way, overlap and are anchored in the different societies of the countries. Human resource managers are also influenced in their decision on the aspects that do not exist as fixed guidelines or laws (regulative pillar) but that are equally based on the normative and cultural-cognitive pillar. In summary, it can be seen that the influences on the decisions regarding design of training and recruiting practices are multi-layered and that companies are well aware of the duality of their institutional environment. Through local autonomy in decision-making or coordination with the parent company the solution seems to be legitimised in both environments.

6 Conclusion and outlook

It is clear that if training activities are offered as initial training for young professionals, most companies fall back on the German dual training system, which indicates a strong influence of the local environment. In contrast to the studies on German companies abroad, here, no extensive training is imported from abroad, and only in a few individual cases is training offered outside the system at all. Other studies on training and further HR practices showed a stronger adaptation of the strategy to the two environments that partly also include hybrid solutions (Pilz & Wiemann, 2021; Stavrou et al., 2021; Wiemann & Pilz, 2020), but also the influence by the local environment (Vogelsang & Pilz, 2020), which seems to be especially strong in Germany. However, the fact that such hybrid solutions do not show up in this study does not mean that there are no influences from the home country at all. A closer look at the influences on this decision shows that despite the predominant use of the dual training system as a form of training, the subsidiaries still do not act 'like German companies' in their internal decisions and the influences from the home country sometimes become apparent in intensive negotiation processes with the parent company. Thus, the different systems with the underlying rules, norms and cultural aspects anchored in the institutional environment become clear in the discussions and exchanges with the parent company.

Nevertheless, this knowledge on foreign companies can be used to better address the target group of (potential) training companies to support them in their pursuit to meet their demand for skilled workers.

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