

On the construction and diagnostics of social competence



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Be it the PISA study or unemployment, the debate on competences and balancing them has been growing in importance in recent years. The notion of competence is being used in an ever-increasing number of ways. Reading skills, intercultural skills, the ability to manage conflict, media literacy, key skills and social competence show the wide range of meanings and differing interpretations of the term.

A secondary evaluation on skill auditing was carried out by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) which resulted in a new programme on the acquisition and evaluation of professional abilities. Following the controversial PISA study, a new international study on the occupational skills of adults will be carried out until 2010, along with a cross-national analysis of education systems. This PIAAC study (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) is expected to bring to light details about people's education and employment history as well as abilities in mathematics, reading comprehension and information and communication technology. To this end, the OECD has committed to an international analysis of human resources and an accompanying evaluation of the educational system. Furthermore, the study is expected to highlight the meaning of key competences in the workplace and problems of (re)integrating young jobseekers and more senior employees into the world of work (cf. OECD, 2008).

The results could bring the meaning of social competences as key qualifications for job success into the spotlight on the matter of job-related training. Therefore the study is expected to yield information about the meaning of non-formal qualifications which, in line with the European framework programme on lifelong learning (cf. European Commission, 2001), were also devised with disadvantaged jobseekers in mind. At the same time, the study will evaluate the methods and instruments used for the guidance and integration of jobseekers into the workplace and will identify new strategies for promoting employability.

The notion of competence as the focus of education and job market policy

The term 'competence' "takes its roots from Latin and derives from the verb 'competere'. This can mean to have a right to as much as it does to coincide" (cf. Schäfer, 2007, page 4). Latin legal scholars used the adjective 'competens' in the sense of responsible, empowered, lawful, proper (cf. Erpenbeck, 2007, page XVIII).

In modern parlance, responsibility has come to mean ability and capability. "A competency is more than just knowledge and skills. It involves the ability to meet complex demands, by drawing on and mobilising psychosocial resources (including skills and attitudes) in a particular context. For example, the ability to communicate effectively is a competency that may draw on an individual's knowledge of language, practical IT skills and attitudes towards those with whom he or she is communicating." (OECD, 2005, page 4).

In the discussion on how to combat high levels of unemployment among young people, skill auditing can provide a new dimension.

Based on the examination of published literature from France, the United Kingdom, Germany and the United States of America, the following composite definition of competence is offered by the European Union:

"Competence includes":

- i) cognitive competence involving the use of theory and concepts, as well as informal tacit knowledge gained experientially;
- ii) functional competence (skills or know-how), those things that a person should be able to do when they are functioning in a given area of work, learning or social activity;
- iii) personal competence involving knowing how to conduct oneself in a specific situation; and
- iv) ethical competence involving the possession of certain personal and professional values.” (Commission of the European Communities, 2005, page 11)

In contrast to the notion of competence, knowledge comprises certifiable abilities and educational achievements which were acquired throughout the education process.

Despite the discussion that has been stirring about the notion of competence, up until now there has been a lack of a standard definition and clear distinction from other ideas about qualifications.

With the national action plan on employment (PAN-Emploi), the Ministry of Labour in 1999 (Mémorial, 1999, page 190) implemented the skill audit as an evaluation instrument for jobseekers within the framework of restructuring the national employment strategy. The law on guaranteed minimum income (RMG) also brings with it the possibility of RMG recipients being required to carry out a skill audit (cf. Mémorial, 2004, page 1544).

Moreover, a recent OECD audit underlines the significance of jobseekers carrying out a skill audit (cf. Grubb, 2007). Since 2002, skill audits have been given by job centres whilst providing the unemployed with professional guidance (SAPDE – Service d’accompagnement personnalise des demandeurs d’emploi) and devised by an external consultancy. The 5611 law (Mémorial, 2007) has adopted the skill audit from the PAN law.

In the discussion on how to combat high levels of unemployment among young people, skill auditing can provide a new dimension.

The correlation between formal educational achievements and success in the workplace is undisputed. Alongside skills and certified knowledge, social skills and key competences also have a clear supporting role to play in the successful transition from school to working life. Young jobseekers are already overburdened by the general interviewing process and have a striking tendency to portray themselves negatively. Experiences in the family home, in educational institutions, public authorities and with figures of authority are shaped by contempt and a feeling of being undervalued. These negative experiences affect self-perception and bring about the unnecessary disclosure of shortcomings. During the skill audit, it is not uncommon for young people especially to be surprised by the discovery of their own strengths. Whilst they may be lacking in formal educational qualifications, many non-academically inclined young people nevertheless possess well-developed social skills that are considered an asset by successful employment agencies.

Social competence: conflict vs. Compromise

The numerous dimensions of social competence derive from the interplay between social and emotional knowledge and abilities. In general, social competence denotes successful action in interpersonal relations. This means displaying the correct social behaviour in a variety of situations. What may seem correct in one situation can turn out to be counterproductive and disadvantageous in other scenarios. Social competence is thus mirrored in a differentiated, situation-based catalogue of behaviour, which allow statements to be made about the personality traits (character) of a person. Ultimately, social competence is about being able to express one’s own interests in interpersonal contexts whilst at the same time adapting to expectations and being able to respect the concerns of others.

Social competence therefore manifests itself in abilities and skills that make successful (target-oriented) behaviour possible whilst taking into account one's own concerns as well as those of others. The complexity of social interaction calls for a colourful, well-balanced repertoire which is suitable for the situation at hand. Therefore social competence is always a successful behavioural mix in the area between conflict (ability to see things through to completion, target-setting, etc) and cooperation (acceptance, tolerance, etc). Positive aspects of social competence in working life are therefore team spirit, direct communication and constructive contributions to conversations.

Successful interpersonal behaviour can therefore not simply be defined on the basis of behavioural disposition. Rather, various character traits and the behaviour arising from them can combine to reach the goal in question.

Identification and encouragement of social competences

The diagnostician's role is to determine the important elements according to the actual job specification. Much simpler is the correlation between socially incompetent interaction (hesitation) and false behaviour and the negative consequences in the social environment. Because of its complexity social competence is, quite simply, very difficult to identify. Therefore, an all-encompassing description of social competence is impossible as it must constantly recognise and integrate new dimensions.

By looking at the complexity of social interaction, suitable instruments for diagnosis can be mapped onto the characteristics of social competence. The various dimensions of social competence can be identified through a standardised combination of multidimensional, diagnostic instruments and differentiated forms of observation and can be brought together in the form of a skill audit.

Describing personality traits is not only a major challenge for experts. Everyone knows the difficulty of describing the characteristics of friends and relatives, not to mention pinpointing them. In addition to this, in behavioural settings, different reactions are triggered depending on the situation. Even if the setting and behavioural pattern are familiar, the reactions from the conversation partner and their behavioural effects are difficult to predict. In research and diagnostic practice, the very definition and empirical classification of social competence falls through due to the complexity of personal skills and the wide spectrum of definitions. The various angles to defining social competence mean that there are vastly differing approaches to surveying and auditing personality traits.

It is for this reason that the German Ministry of Education spoke out in favour of having certification of competences, which combines the audit with advice, which supports reflection and future planning, self assessment as well as assessment by others, contains formal, non-formal and informal learning processes and offers support for what lies ahead in the world of work. (cf. Federal Ministry for Education and Research, 2004, page 151).

External depiction: Observation/study of behaviour

The study of distinctive competences assists those being tested to assess themselves, with the study (assessment by others) e.g., of evaluation procedures (assessment centre, etc.) and aptitude diagnostic procedures. This reading of social competences represents an important aspect of personnel selection and development in organisational psychology.

Whilst technical abilities and skills are objectively evaluated and defined throughout, there is a shortage of validated tests for example standardised procedures for defining interdisciplinary achievement potential. In this context, the majority of test procedures are anything but objective. Many psychological test procedures are only of limited use to the competence study due to their structure. The validity (cause-effect-context), objectivity and precision (measuring accuracy) of many competence tests are mostly only of restricted use for

a multicultural society such as Luxembourg. To some extent, after repeated uses, the procedures yield very different results (lack of reliability).

The majority of test procedures fall down on the language barrier alone in many self-diagnostic procedures. Many procedures based on test questions are designed for intellectuals and have little significance for less advantaged groups of people. Group exercises and standardised role plays are very well-suited to behavioural studies of social competences and these can be followed up by a skill audit (cf. Hinsch & Pflingsten, page 226 et seqq., Belz & Siegrist, 2000, IV section). Dynamic role plays fix the participants' gaze firmly on what is happening within the group and mean that the open observation is quickly forgotten about. The study of competence traits can be standardised through implementation (i.e. measuring of competences and constructing test procedures for identifying competences).

A description of personality traits together with a uniform set of evaluation criteria makes it easier for the observers to study personality traits. Open observation as opposed to hidden observation is carried out transparently in terms of content and in the presence of the people undergoing the testing. In the process, one or more of the observers with a checklist of characteristics monitors the development of personality features. In a systematic observation process, the ideal scenario would have several observers describing the participants' characteristics. In this way, the features can be recorded in writing during the group dynamic exercises/role plays (simulation) and tasks in a range of settings (exercises). An additional possibility for third-party description is observation through participation which makes it possible to record features whilst following or leading the exercise.

Provided that there are enough observers available, a rotating observation system can allow for various studies to be made on the participants' features. The observations are consolidated in the subsequent observer conference. This systematic observation ensures the objectivity (observer agreement) of the competence study.

The implementation of the procedure, the trained observers as well as the standardised observation process all contribute towards the objectivity, reliability (precision of measurement) and validity (cause-effect-context) of the process.

Change through feedback and monitoring

The results of the third-person evaluation can be contrasted against the self appraisal for a job specification during a feedback session. In general, these feedback sessions take place in the form of a confidential one-to-one interview following directly after the observation debriefing. This feedback i.e. the exchange between self- and third-party assessment whilst referring to the observation analysis itself contributes towards character development (c.f. von Räden, page 313). Moreover, the group dynamic exercises benefit the change process and strengthen personality on a lasting basis (cf. Jugert et al., 2002, page 24 f).

The skill audit should be geared towards the participant (i.e. make use of participation), and should be understandable and transparent. Furthermore, biographical elements (formal and informal abilities) are incorporated into the audit. A dynamic arrangement of skill audits are provided through seminars with group dynamic exercises, individual exercises and test procedures lasting several days.

Advice, skill audits, guidance and contemplation must be provided by specialists. This approach also enables more self-determination and autonomy (empowerment) respectively.

Meaning for young people seeking employment

Placing unemployed people is proving to be increasingly difficult on the basis of the higher demands of the job market. At the same time, less advantaged young people without qualifications especially are lacking the power to reflect on their abilities and skills correctly

in order to estimate and project themselves when faced with a job specification on the job market.

For one thing, non-academically minded young people find that when job seeking, they are restricted to a few sectors of the job market. For another thing, having limited flexibility, mobility and the ability to get to the destination are also disadvantages when it comes to job hunting. In general, less advantaged young people are lacking in self-worth, job-based qualifications and family support. Unequal opportunities in education, language barriers which prevent integration (cf. Fehlen, 2008, page 52 et seqq.), social and regional disadvantages (cf. Meyers/Willems, 2008), academic failure, family conflicts and a lack of self-confidence all hinder opportunities for the development of these young people. In addition to this, recent years have seen health limitations, poor living conditions and financial problems coming into play. Since the family of origin are mostly themselves identified by unemployment and socially difficult situations, this living environment and life experience is mirrored in the young people perceiving themselves as school failures and unemployed (cf. Berg, Milmeister/Schoos, 2005, page 39 et seqq.). Many unemployed people lack this capacity to reflect and are impatient to overcome prolonged unemployment (cf. Schneider, 2007, page 36 et seq.).

Nevertheless, the majority of young jobseekers possess skills and abilities which an apprenticeship or employment agency can make use of. Many young people speak several languages fluently and are suitable for job in business or trade. The study of key qualifications (cf. OECD, 2005, page 13 et seqq. and the Official Journal of the European Communities, page 11) in this context is an important element for skill auditing non-academically minded young people.

In addition to these competences, those that go above and beyond certifiable knowledge and practical abilities (advanced training courses through club activities etc) also count. An additional distinctive skill is intercultural competence, which involves successful contact, tolerance, recognition of others and communication with people from other cultures. In career guidance, professional abilities and skills as well as the aptitude of the school leavers are taken into account sufficiently. What is missing are the professional requirements for unrestricted access to working life so social competences form an important and often underrated resource for adolescents' employability. Be it for sales people, production assistants or traders, social competences and correct social behaviour are always prerequisites for further success in individual career paths. Even though social competences cannot make up for a lack of technical competence, they still intensify the jobseeker's motivation and encourage their personal development and interaction with others. The resulting learning effects, the routines and self-portrayal are the products of the skill audit process and the professional guidance of jobseekers. Consequently, because of the missing educational achievements, the skill audit for less advantaged young people is based on the "discovery" and documentation of non-formal abilities which are acquired outside of conventional educational structures.

Conclusion

Skill audits are of high-ranking importance for further professional development or reintegration into working life.

In general, young people are interested in a skill audit in a group setting. Adolescents have a fundamental interest in discovering their abilities and seeing the crucial, objective differences in their personalities. The feedback from group participants in an environment built on trust contributes towards the formation of identity (cf. Philipp, 2007). In working life, social skills are a positive resource for successful interaction. The social setting is a decisive factor in the acquisition of social skills. Corresponding opportunities for socialising are found in the

family, nursery, school and peer groups, to name but a few. Those lacking in socialising opportunities (inherited socially or socio-structural disadvantages) and development impairment can be partially compensated for over the course of the lifelong learning process with the development of individual potential and new interpersonal behavioural options (changes in behaviour).

Skill audits counteract the current resistance to advisory instruments and support measures where the emphasis is on hierarchy. The so-called reluctance to take advice can be overcome during skill training sessions carried out over several weeks. For this purpose, the content and speed of the training measures must be geared towards the candidates' individual requirements. Over the course of the competence assessment, young people learn new things about themselves and become experts on the subject of themselves (cf. Schuler, 1996, page 59 et seqq.).

Standardisation of the skill audit can support career path planning and the coordination of special instruments (advice, qualifications, employment). Skill audits have low levels of complexity and so therefore also reach participants who do not possess the skills needed for a job creation scheme. In this way, measures determining skills contribute towards the career planning of young jobseekers.

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