

SKILL EUROPE (Structure, Knowledge, Information in Lifelong Learning for Europe)

A PROJECT TO RESEARCH AND IMPLEMENT LIFELONG LEARNING IDEAS AND CONCEPTS IN EUROPEAN INDUSTRY

Executive Summary

In many parts of the world concepts of lifelong learning are becoming more and more important as a means of improving the provision and quality of Continuing Education and Training. In the USA and in Japan particularly, where the establishment of a lifelong learning culture in industry and the community is seen as essential for competitive advantage, the movements are strong and the responsibility falls equally upon Higher Education and Industry to provide it. Europe lags behind Japan and USA in many respects, though EC Programmes such as FORCE have done most to initiate much-needed activity to meet the challenges of the 1990s and beyond, and to turn industrial organisations into 'Learning Organisations' in which all employees will participate. Throughout Europe there are national efforts to harmonise the provision of Education and Training at all levels and much interest in the Lifelong Learning approach as a means both of getting people into the learning habit and of developing the human potential in the workforce.

SKILL EUROPE was established to set up partnerships between a company location of between 50 and 200 people (the enabler) and a training provider (the provider) in 4 countries. It was not a Training Needs Analysis. The approach is to find out learning needs of as many personnel on a site as possible and to give to management a record of these needs. An enlightened company would discuss with learning providers how they could be satisfied.

This activity was also coordinated at the European level to provide the European dimension. The audit of learning requirements was agreed between the partners and implemented. This was then examined and modified to take out the anomalies which were found to exist as a result of carrying out the surveys.

The results were written up into a report for management and this also contained solid recommendations for action. In connection with this a questionnaire analysis tool was developed for use with the spreadsheet programme, Excel 5.0. This generated charts and tables from the answers to the questionnaires and made the compilation of the management report into a relatively easy task for companies carrying out their own audits in the future.

Thus SKILL EUROPE has

- a) completed five learning requirements audits at five European company sites and produced valuable data for management and
- b) generalised the methodology and analysis into a Learning Requirements Audit toolkit, such that any company can carry out its own learning audit in the future.

The project also developed a seminar on Learning Audits for companies across Europe (see annexe 8) to be held in Brussels on November 7th. More than 100 companies were invited to send Human Resources and/or Training Managers and more than 50 Training Providers were invited to send staff. Unfortunately, the response to this large marketing effort was inadequate to justify the holding of the seminar. Attempts will be made at a later date to disseminate the results of the project by this method. However, the project results will, in fact, be presented at the Global Conference on Lifelong Learning in Rome, when all the project Training Providers will be present. This is a prestige event attended by more than 450 decision makers.

In addition, the Learning Audit toolkit will be made available to members of the rapidly growing ELLI (European Lifelong Learning Initiative) network, which is now approaching 100 organisations from Business and Industry, Higher Education and Professional Associations. Workshops on Learning Audits will be held through out 1995.

The participants in SKILL EUROPE were:

UK:	Training Provider:	Anglia Polytechnic University Centre for Continuing Education
	Industry Location:	London International
	Training Provider:	University of Sheffield Hallam
	Industry Location:	The Hinckley Group
Netherlands:	Training Provider:	Netherlands Open University
	Industry Location:	Sphinx
Greece: (Contractors)	Training Provider:	Office for Vocational Education and Training
	Industry Location:	BP Greece
Italy: I	Training Provider:	SCIENTER
	Industry Location:	HIMONT
Belgium:	European Lifelong Learning Initiative (Project Direction and Coordination) ECLO (Observer)	

Overall, the participating Industries professed themselves to be satisfied with the results of the project and said that they learned considerably from its implementation. They will recommend its use for other companies.

For the Training Providers, they too have gained considerably from carrying out the project. Not only have they identified courses and projects which they can make available to the industries with which they have been working, but also they have gained considerable insight into the carrying out of Learning Audits which will enable them to extend such activities to other companies, for the benefit of both.

Implementation

Each separate project organisation has worked in a different way with a similar tool. Mostly this is explained in the individual reports, but, at a European level some points need to be made.

1. Initially, the intention was to carry out interviews with all people on site. However, the restricted timescale of the project (8 months from receiving the contract), the mobility of some of the people and the continuous demands of the workplace, made that impossible in some cases. Thus in UK, London International and the Hinckley group made all their staff available for interview, in Italy and the Netherlands, HIMONT and Sphinx made a subsection of staff available for interview and the most was done by questionnaire, and in Greece, BP Greece preferred to supervise the questionnaire themselves after consultation with the Unions.

2. The learning requirements audit was developed jointly between the Training Providers at meetings held in Brussels. Companies were also invited to these meetings, and in one case participated. Each Training Provider and the Project Director produced a draft of the questions which it thought should be asked. These were then amalgamated into a common questionnaire and Training Providers cleared this with their respective companies. The questions dealt with the past experiences, the present situation and the future hopes of each employee and were of course translated into the home language..

In implementation, the questionnaire was the same in all cases, though culture differences precluded the asking of certain questions. For example in Greece questions about the future were deemed not to be relevant or appropriate.

3. Frequent meetings were held at participants sites in Brussels, Chania, Bologna, Heerlen and Prades to harmonise the effort and to process results. All were invited, though it was the Training Providers who attended. All participated in the drafting and refinement of the questionnaire and the development of the analysis tool. Valuable technical assistance was received from experts at SCIENTER in the use of Excel to provide effective data analysis. SCIENTER also developed the data entry sheets shown in Annexe 2, and which are also a part of the final toolkit. (Annexe 9 provides a record of the progress of SKILL EUROPE through the minutes of the meetings and the business discussed.)

Results

This section is written to highlight the differences between the parts of the project, though there is in effect a surprising amount of homogeneity between the countries, which indicates that business cultures at least are operating at a European level. Certainly the major difference in perception occurs between Northern and Southern Europe, and particularly between Greece and the other four participating countries. The concept of Lifelong Learning as a whole-of-life activity, in which life at work and life outside of work are part of the same continuum is more resisted in Southern Europe, where the lines of demarcation between one and the other seem to be more rigidly applied by both individuals and companies. Similarly the burden of deciding who takes education and when is more a matter for the individual in Northern Europe than in the South. In Sphinx, for example, sums of money are made available to all employees to take education and training so long as it is related to the needs of the company (though there is a wide interpretation for this), whereas in Southern Europe the company would normally make the decision on the spending of money for this. These points, of course, are generalisations, since quite a large body of people at London International wished to keep education at work and education outside of work quite separate.

However, these seem to affect workforce perceptions in those questions where an opinion was required on the likelihood of education and training being made available easily and freely to individuals. In all parts of the survey, even in Sphinx, there was some scepticism about this, reflecting on the one hand a failure in the company information and communication system and on the other hand a lack of insight into the true nature of Lifelong Learning. As would be expected for those not immersed in the psychology of education, the concept of developing human potential when applied to the self was a strange one.

Four further key points need to be made.

a) For as much as 60% of the employees interviewed, this was the first time that they had been asked questions about learning and self-development since leaving school. Many, including those whom, it had been assumed, had no learning requirements, responded enthusiastically to the audit. This produced a huge increase in opportunities for learning provision which the learning providers could not always satisfy.

b) In general, learning providers present what they are prepared to offer in terms of learning – courses, seminars etc. A lifelong learning approach would first find out what people want to learn – for career, for life, for personal development, for leisure activities, for family etc – and then provide the courses. The project highlighted the responsibility of learning providers to carry out more research in this area.

c) The requirements audit provides a wealth of data for management and for future research. In this study we have analysed only that which is presented through tables and pie charts and which is immediately useful for management information purposes. However, correlations and comparisons to a much deeper level of understanding are possible through the cross-connecting of data items. Further statistical work would reveal much that is interesting, some that is important and perhaps other data which is crucial.

d) The database established with these five companies is valuable in its own right. Future studies using the toolkit developed should develop data for the same database. In this way a progressive European database of workforce needs can be developed. This could be used for many studies of learning need and provision, social trends etc and give great insight into the development of European Education and Training Infrastructures at International, National and Local levels.

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