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APPRENTICESHIP

LESSONS FROM EUROPE

BY MARY MCCAIN

“THE CUSTOMER DRIVES WHAT THE FIRM DOES, which drives what the economy does. School cannot teach how this works, nor can workshops within schools. One can only learn this in the workplace.” ● Those comments by a senior official of the Koblenz, Germany, Handcraft Chamber typify the German view of the apprenticeship system—and of all education and training systems—as an integral part of the nation’s economic and employment system. ● The German apprenticeship system is designed to equip recently graduated apprentices with occupational skills and credentials that meet the demands of employers.

The United States can learn a lot from school-to-work transition programs in Germany and Denmark.

It is a dual system; apprenticeship is a combined school-based and work-based curriculum experience. Yet, the system is basically firm-driven. As in other western European countries, government, labor, and education are closely involved in developing and operating the apprenticeship system. But the firms at which the apprentices work are ultimately responsible for the system. The firms provide the funding and are responsible for testing, choosing, and hiring apprentices.

One of the distinguishing points of the western European apprenticeship experience is its place within a

and elsewhere. Critics say German apprenticeship is rigid and too focused on occupation-specific skills, and that it ignores the flexible, basic skills that provide a base for high-performance workplaces.

The underlying philosophy of Germany's dual system is that, after a period of education, a student should have the opportunity to learn a trade through an alternating school-based and work-based curriculum.

The system identifies more than 300 occupations, each with a set of standards and its own curriculum. Processes are in place for revising

helping him or her achieve the required skills. If an apprentice fails to pass the final exam, the employer must continue the instruction until the apprentice can pass.

An employer makes a good-faith attempt to take on only as many apprentices as it believes it will have jobs for at the end of the three-year period. But if the jobs are not available, the employer is under no obligation to hire a graduate apprentice after the apprenticeship.

The system of education and training for apprentices is completely self-contained, separate from a company's adult, "in-firm" education and



larger system. Apprenticeship is linked with the other employment, education, and training systems in these countries. Those links help to ensure opportunities for every young person or adult, regardless of education or career path.

The tradition of apprenticeship in western Europe is especially strong. An examination of apprenticeship systems in European countries provides an opportunity to observe not only nationwide systems at work, but also the changes those systems are undergoing in response to economic change.

Preparing German youths

People around the world have long regarded the German apprenticeship system as a model for providing young people with the skills and credentials needed for an occupation. But the system recently has come under criticism, both in Germany

and elsewhere. Critics say German apprenticeship is rigid and too focused on occupation-specific skills, and that it ignores the flexible, basic skills that provide a base for high-performance workplaces. The system also oversees the companies that take apprentices, the apprentices themselves, and the teachers and *meisters* (masters) who are responsible for the instruction.

The firm-driven nature of the system rests on the premise that young people who do not pursue higher education should be encouraged to learn an occupation in preparation for employment. An underpinning of general knowledge is crucial; the occupational skills are buttressed by an academic base and a theoretical base. But the outcome of the German apprenticeship system is employment, not merely education for its own sake.

To take part in the dual system, a student must have a three-year apprenticeship contract with a specific firm. Firms pay the apprentice's wages and are also responsible for

training. The *meisters* and teachers responsible for the work-based part of apprentice education must be accredited by the federal government before they can teach apprentices and be mentors to them.

Many variations and exceptions exist within this system:

- ▶ between small and large companies
- ▶ among geographic regions
- ▶ between "new" occupations (technology or paraprofessional occupations such as paralegals or translators) and traditional ones
- ▶ between the customary "skill-specific" focus of the required standards and the recent trend toward more general, flexible skills for high-performance workplaces.

Government, business, labor, and education are all involved at all levels and stages of the process of managing and implementing apprenticeships—and indeed all education and training. That includes relevant

Firsthand Observation in Western Europe

Mary McCain observed the German and Danish apprenticeship systems firsthand in November 1993. She represented the American Society for Training and Development on a team that was part of a project of the Center for Learning and Competitiveness.

The project aimed at promoting understanding and awareness of international youth-apprenticeship systems, as the United States wrestles with expanding its own school-to-work programs.

The timing of the trips was propitious, McCain says, in that it coincided with the final stages of the Clinton administration's School-to-Work Opportunities legislation. The new law (see the article, "Partners in Transition," by Mark Gittleman, page 28), encourages the establishment of state systems of youth apprenticeship and similar activities—rather than simply increasing the number of local programs.

In the center's project, each team traveled to two or three countries, including Germany, Denmark, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Switzerland. Each team examined a specific aspect of a system—quality; governance and finance; economic partnerships; career guidance; and standards, assessment, and credentials. Teams included representatives of public and private organizations from business, secondary and post-secondary education, organized labor, and trade and professional associations.

As a member of the Quality Programs Team, McCain says she was able to observe all aspects of the programs and systems her team looked at. Beyond the lessons and caveats specific to apprenticeship systems, she cites important points and recommendations for American business in general—and for those involved in workplace learning and performance in particular.

Those points may form a useful backdrop for U.S. organizations as they look to participate in the school-to-work transition for young people in the United States. In fact, one of the purposes of the center's European project was to begin an effort to ascertain the critical elements of a system that would be designed specifically for the American experience and conditions.

A full report on the findings of the Center for Learning and Competitiveness project is available for \$5. Please write to the center at the School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; fax 301/403-4675.

The Danes have moved rapidly toward an emphasis on a broad range of skills, not just occupation-specific skills. And Denmark has reduced the number of occupational categories for apprenticeships to fewer than 20.

In addition, the Danish Council for Vocational Education is examining different ways of learning. The council is attempting to empower K-12 schools, as well as apprentice/vocational education providers, to accommodate the varied paces and ways in which young people learn.

As in Germany, "social partners" including government, educational, business, and labor organizations take responsibility for the Danish system.

Of particular importance to the development of American apprenticeship systems is the existence of linking and catalyst institutions in both Germany and Denmark. Each country has workers' councils and other types of employee and management organizations, both within companies and outside of them. These groups monitor, participate in, and make suggestions for the systems of education and training for apprentices and adults.

Germany has training centers, operated by the two "chambers" (one for handcrafts and one for commerce and industry). The training centers serve a variety of needs. They provide technology transfer to small firms, and they serve as centers for apprenticeship or adult-training courses beyond the scope or capacity of small or medium-size firms. They also form part of the link between youth apprenticeship training and adult-employee training.

The Danish Technological Institute is only one of the similar institutions in Denmark. As in Germany, the overseer bodies in Denmark act as a link between pre-employment education and training, and in-firm employee training. The overseer entities also attempt to identify the changing skill needs of the workplace, to translate those needs into in-firm training for currently employed workers, and to establish apprenticeship curricula to match.

federal departments or agencies, the national organizations that represent business, and the organization that represents labor.

These so-called "social partners" both accept responsibility and are allowed to have responsibility for the system.

The education community is involved and plays a critical role. But unlike in the United States, the education system does not have ultimate authority over students.

Denmark's "sandwich system"

The Danish youth apprenticeship system, nicknamed the "sandwich system" (referring to the alternating school/work periods of the apprenticeship), bears superficial resem-

blance to the German system. But the Danish system allows a student more time and more opportunity to choose an occupation. Denmark also has more options for those who do not enter into a formal apprenticeship contract.

The standards and curriculum for the school and work-based learning components of Danish apprenticeship are as carefully laid out as in Germany. But in Denmark, the work experience is overseen by a designated "experienced worker," not by formally accredited masters. Being chosen to teach and to mentor an apprentice is considered an honor.

As in Germany, firms in Denmark pay apprentices' wages.

Points for the United States to keep in mind

Why should the United States establish its own system of school-to-work opportunities? The justification is a general agreement that the United States fails to provide adequate education or employment opportunities for young people who are not college bound.

The U.S. federal government, states, communities, and individual companies and schools are now beginning to respond to the call to create programs and a system for addressing the needs of young people who do not go on to attend college. As these different organizations climb on board, they should all keep in mind some points from the western European school-to-work experience.

The determining factor for success is employers: If companies do not take an active role in developing, managing, and implementing

school-to-work systems, there is no hope of success.

Businesses must also begin to consider the differences between a system and a program; they must help design the links between the education needs and the employment needs of students and the needs of companies.

The United States must look at the feasibility of local intermediary and linking organizations. Such groups include the Chamber of Commerce and local unions, as well as local chapters of professional associations such as the American Society for Training and Development. They also include informal coalitions of small companies in a particular industry or of a particular size.

As the systems in western Europe begin to respond to the differing skill requirements of high-performance workplaces, their discussions can inform American business's approach

to the development of its own school-based and work-based curriculum. In addition, such changes underscore the need for companies to take a hard look at the skills they require of their current workforces—and at the ways in which changing requirements will influence the workers of the future. ■

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