Requirements for new learning concepts

Challenges for small and medium-sized enterprises

The situation in small enterprises is underlined by the following factors. On the one hand, they must react flexibly on developments on the market or recognise trends as quickly as possible. This means developing new products and services and finding new markets, competing with rival firms and introducing virtual organisational, working and learning structures. On the other hand, they must offer their employees a certain social security with regard to the continuity of the working relationship to keep the qualified employees in the enterprise.

A prerequisite for mastering these challenges is that executives like the employees see an entrepreneurial and individual opportunity for development and learning in the process of change.

This means for the individual employee:

+ Regular learning, primarily at the workplace
+ Personal recognition of training needs
+ Personal search of training opportunities
+ Seeking consultation (training consultants, coaches, personnel developers, training providers) on one's own initiative

On the part of the enterprises this means:

+ Alignment of the enterprise structures with personnel development by giving more emphasis to the special character of the employees and utilising them more for the development of the company
+ Change from a "blanket training program" to individual personnel development
+ Creation of frameworks which enable learning at the workplace (creation of learning structures at the workplace) and self-paced learning

Requirements for new learning concepts

These developments and challenges require new forms of learning, characterised by: the realisation of complex teaching/learning arrangements with practical problem definitions, the promotion of self-reliance and self-organisation in learning, higher emphasis on learning in groups, the assurance of dissemination by application of the acquired abilities in other learning processes and finally the evaluation and reflection of the learning process.

Such forms of teaching/learning take on a particular significance in which the approach to self-organised, self-paced learning is crucial. A change from supply-orientation to demand-orientation takes place.

The traditional forms of didactics are still centred however on homogeneous target groups, similar learning prerequisites and common learning results and are therefore interested in a uniform learning process. In contrast, constructivism emphasises more the individual background of experience.

Knowledge cannot be "arranged" from a constructivist perspective, but has to be built up in concrete situations from personal experience (to be constructed), because only knowledge which is personally built up and integrated into personal structures is correctly understood knowledge.

The basic roles of learners and teachers change accordingly. The teachers create the conditions for self-organisation in learning. Constructivist learning theories therefore target case and problem-related learning in real situations.

Development of strengths

Against the background of the developments outlined above, vocational education is accordingly given a new, additional direction. It must prepare the employees for change and support them in the development of vocational orientation.

It is task of the vocational initial and further training or personnel development to define and promote the competences under inclusion into the work process.

Competences are more than qualifications gained from professional study. They include the abilities, skills, methods, knowledge, experiences, attitudes, needs and values which a person acquires, develops and applies in life. They are bound to the individual and his personal ability for responsible action.

Competences are determined from two sides: from the situation (requirement side) and the person (personal resources). Core competences and competences to adapt are thus distinct from each other.

The personal resources of an individual are called core competences. They are abilities and skills which are mastered to a special degree and used in an unmistakable way by an individual.

The core competences have three functions important to the employees:

1. They enable orientation: Knowing one's own strengths and experiencing them in different (vocational) real life situations becomes the motor of professional development.
2. They enable continuity: The individual keeps the core competences, independent of the kind of work carried out or where he works.
3. It forms the basis for technical qualifications: A core competence can only be used in a certain technical context. Technical qualifications are therefore required to use them.

Core competences in combination with a certain technical qualification alone therefore are not sufficient for practical vocational activities. They must rather be supplemented by the competence to adapt. This means the readiness and ability to pursue the various changing qualification-related requirements and to be able to apply these with regard to the personal biography.

The competence to adapt can be applied on three levels: on the social, institutional-organisational and technical level:

1. On social level: The social level refers to the interaction processes and means the ability to interact in continually changing new situations with new people within and outside the enterprise i.e. to establish contact and communicate with customers.
2. On institutional-organisational level: On the organisational level it means the ability to move around confidently in an organisation (enterprise). This therefore includes recognising the respective systems of values and standards and assessing and coordinating them with existing experience.
3. On technical level: The competence to adapt on the technical level means the ability to apply technical knowledge and skills acquired in other situations or at work.

Development of experience rooms

Didactic aspects to the acquisition of competence

The competence to adapt can be best acquired in relation to certain situations. Suitable experience situations additional to the working process should therefore be offered to the employees during vocational further training to promote the acquisition of competence to adapt.

An experience room here means real social situations which are new and alien to the employees in technical, spatial and social terms and represent a learning challenge.

Experience rooms can be set up or found outside and within the enterprise.

Such an experience room **outside an enterprise** represents an activity dictated by time and distance. The employees are deployed in a branch office, an assembly plant or in a cooperating partner company for six to eight weeks.

They must then learn to organise their private and vocational lives and adjust to new activity requirements and new colleagues.

A further possibility is an activity abroad. The competence to adapt is enhanced here by intercultural competence.

There is however a variety of experience rooms **within an enterprise** too, such as changes into other departments and education/further training at different study locations.

The acquisition of competence to adapt can also be promoted by confronting employees with changing situational requirements and new roles in which they have to learn and work self dependent and self-directed i.e. in projects.

Summarising some examples for experience rooms in initial and further training are:

Outside the enterprise:
+ Activity in other enterprises at home and abroad
+ Joint further training or network training

Within the enterprise:

Organisational orientation:
+ Changes into other departments or team training
+ Further training at different study locations
+ Virtual learning in further training

Didactic orientation:
+ Project work in further training
+ Learning islands
+ Competence-oriented seminars
+ Job rotation