

Workforce Development in the US - quo vadis?

After two busy and interesting years in Austin, Texas, we have returned to Switzerland. Now is the perfect time to take a look back on those two years in the life of our family, during which time my wife and I worked as special aides for workforce development in the US, and of course we also took in a lot of sun, made new friends, and watched as our seven year old daughter easily and perfectly learned English.

1. What did we achieve?

In the judgment of our American employers and our former partners in schools and firms, we have left behind deep tracks in Austin. They feel that we have accelerated the slow process in the USA toward a working occupational education system during the past two years, at least in Austin. The way we see things, we have achieved rather little, since only very few young people have begun and continued occupational education programs during our time in the States, which we would mark as innovative and valuable. The story of Sisyphus has haunted us the whole time.

2. What makes changes so difficult?

In the US, 'education' means schools. Other learning environments are either not used (like workplaces in firms, for example) or their existence is simply ignored (television, etc.) For a Swiss person, the easiest way to understand the system is to imagine that all our youths would have to go to 'Gymnasium', whether they wanted to or not, and whether they were ready for it or not. There is no precedent for firms to worry early on about the professional development of the new generation. This task is delegated entirely to the schools, and one then complains about the bad results. Only very few firms

have recognized that the preparation of young people for the working world cannot be done by the schools alone. As Allyson Peerman of the firm AMD writes, "There is simply no way a student can learn what it means to 'work' in a classroom. That learning can only occur at the workplace."¹ However, AMD, a company that I have mentioned in several previous articles, may still be the only one in Austin to see things that way and to act accordingly.

3. What do the schools have to say about possible changes?

Most of the so-called „School-to-Work“ initiatives in the USA are started by the high schools themselves. The main reason for this is the fact that the students are between 14 and 18 years old, the age at which career training begins in other countries. Plus, teenagers are the most difficult group of students to keep in school full time. So it's logical that high schools are the biggest advocates of School-to-Work; they see it as the solution to many of their problems. Paradoxically, they are also one of School-to-Work's most active detractors nationwide. The American high school system is all-inclusive. Accordingly, it has developed a curriculum that is supposed to fit all different kinds of students, and in so doing has become a kind of „Shopping

Mall Institution.“ Demanding academic subjects go hand-in-hand with lighter courses, which we would reserve for free time. The Americans' favorite example of such a course is „Underwater Basket Weaving“. The schools are very clearly set up to keep students busy from 8 am to about 3 pm with scholastic pursuits, and then extra-curricular sports and music activities; after all, their parents have to work all day. The laws are formulated accordingly, and it takes a lot of effort to get students out of school for a day or even part of a day so they can learn something at a workplace. Thus the model we constantly suggested that students alternate a school day with a work day always fell on deaf ears.

4. What has to happen?

After two years, it is clear to me that high schools in their present form can indeed serve a kind of career selection preparation function. But they are not designed at all for a partnership in a dual career training system.

a) Changes on the high school side

In my opinion, only those high schools which no longer see themselves merely as preparatory

schools for university and accept that their students should get work experience, too, have the right to exist. Accordingly, each school should concentrate on specific career areas. For example, a high school of business could consist of students like our 'Wirtschaftsgymnasiasten' (students aiming for an Associate degree in business), our 'Berufsmaturanden' (students aiming for an Applied Associate degree in business), our 'KV-Stiften' (students doing a business apprenticeship), business school students, office apprentices as well as retail and sales apprentices. A strong connection to businesses in the respective areas of the economy is an absolute necessity for many reasons, the very least of which is to have available an appropriate number of workplace learning positions for students. Whereas the Swiss career development system is divided horizontally, by ability level, as well as vertically, by occupation, a vertical distinction is questionable to Americans as being discriminatory.² One such high school does exist, however, only 45 minutes away from Austin in San Antonio: the Northside Business Careers High School, which calls itself „an Enterprising School for Enterprising Students.“ But this school is an exception. Austin still hasn't managed to establish a high-tech high school, although high-tech firms clearly dominate among employers in the area.

b) Community colleges as the natural vocational training schools

Community colleges, which offer high school graduates the

opportunity to get a somewhat job market-based Associate's Degree, have a great advantage over high schools, in that they don't have to entertain their students for an entire day. Instead, the students come for a certain number of hours per week, determine their schedules themselves, and are no longer required to sit in school all day. Companies all over the country have started to team up with these colleges to conceptualize occupational training opportunities that reflect the needs of the job market, like the training for 'Semiconductor Manufacturing Technician' in Austin, for example. The biggest challenge that remains is to convince companies that it's not enough just to design a training program, give some financial assistance, and provide lecturers; the students must be permitted to do actual work at their places of business. What students need are rotating schedules, practical career training goals, and skilled mentors, not just a job to finance their studies.

5. Rethinking on all levels

Occupational training has always had at least three partners: the apprentices, the teachers and the vocational training schools. All these roles need to be revamped in the USA.

a) The schools

Schools currently control education. Although they are not receiving much praise for their work, they nevertheless have all the power. They find it difficult to share this power. Furthermore, the current trend is heading in the direction of more general education and away from occupational

training. "The number of students graduating with two-year technical degrees has steadily declined,"³ (from 60,000 in 1982 to 42,000 in 1994) writes Allyson Peerman in the aforementioned lecture. This development is, in my opinion, just plain wrong, and President Clinton's support of the community college system seems to show he agrees with me.

b) The firms

The later, the better! seems to be their motto when it comes to young people entering the business world. By then, after all, they'll be mature enough to handle it. And the quicker they're trained, the better, because that keeps costs down. Both of these assertions have to be examined if a worldwide, competitive workforce is to exist in the future. Statements such as the following give me hope: "AMD's management team views this program as a long-term workforce development effort that links directly into post secondary education. Therefore, the shortest cycle time in which to develop a potential employee beginning in high school is four years."⁴

c) The potential apprentices, their parents, and the public

The largest part of this rethinking process must bring people away from the belief that only a four-year college degree can lead to a happy life. In fact, most Americans never achieve this goal, which leaves them feeling like second-class citizens and allows

them to be treated as failures.
University of Pennsylvania
Professor Dr. Kenneth Gray,
whom I have often quoted and
who is one of the most active
Americans on this front,
demonstrates time and again
that few can successfully
navigate the supposedly
universally acceptable way
(successful college graduation
and a corresponding reward in
the job market). It's a shame
that he doesn't receive more
attention in the USA.

¹ Testimony of Allyson Peerman,
Community Relations Manager for
Advanced Micro Devices before the
Labor and Human Relations
Subcommittee on Employment and
Training, April 17, 1997, 9:30
a.m., Dirksen Senate Office
Building, p. 6.

² „I think it would be worth-while to
think about giving up the
horizontal structure of the Swiss
career development system; it could
lead to many synergies as well as
among the teachers as the learners
and the labor market.“ The Author

³ see above., p. 4

⁴ see above., p. 4-5