

Chapter 6

Skills Upgrading for Low-qualified Workers in Flanders

by

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This chapter examines a series of skills upgrading initiatives in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. It begins with an analysis of the Flemish labour market, the policy options and the main existing measures in the field of skills upgrading for incumbent workers. Three local case studies illustrate the types of initiatives currently used by non-profit and private sector organisations. These studies show that in spite of several HRM innovations such as job rotation, Flanders remains highly focused on in-work support and sustainable labour market integration for jobseekers and former welfare recipients. In view of the unequal participation in lifelong learning that characterises the Flemish labour market, the authors call for a stronger regional or national strategic focus on the low-skilled incumbent workers.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on skills upgrading initiatives in Flanders, the northern region of Belgium. As a region and community within the Belgian federal state, Flanders has limited authority over labour market policy. It is at the federal level that wage formation and labour protection are regulated, including some of the funding mechanisms for training and social security arrangements such as educational leave schemes. The Flemish authorities and social partners decide on active labour market policies (training provision, subsidy schemes for the promotion of HRM tools, work experience schemes, etc.). This two-tier structure of competencies has several implications for policies towards low-skilled incumbent workers. First, it is necessary to bear in mind that the room for manoeuvre of Flemish policy makers is limited. Secondly, Flemish measures need to be examined in connection with institutional and policy arrangements at the federal level. Thirdly, Flemish policy clearly has its own tradition and priorities: a strong emphasis has always been placed on redistribution of opportunities towards the most disadvantaged groups, such as the labour market integration of the long-term unemployed, those with little or no reading ability, the disabled, etc.

The first three sections of this chapter sketch in the background of the Flemish labour market, the policy options and the main existing measures, including a description of objectives, regulations, target groups, financing and, where possible, the available evaluation material. Following a discussion of the “upskilling potential” of the Flemish measures the chapter takes a closer look at three cases featuring different types of approaches as well as different actors, target groups, workplace settings and geographical locations (see map in Annex 5.A1):

- The Learn & Work Centre “Care & Cleaning” training course and the “Logistic Assistant” training courses for hospitals; both of these are under the umbrella of the NGO Vitamin-W from Antwerp.
- The Jobcoach Network in Ghent.
- The “upskilling of team leaders” at Harol, a manufacturer of roller blinds and sun blinds in Diest.

While only the last case is truly representative of skills upgrading for incumbent workers in the strict sense, the two other studies – which involve the jobless and freshly recruited – serve to illustrate the full spectrum of

policies that seek to improve the position of the low-skilled on the Flemish labour market. In fact, these case studies show that Flanders, like many OECD countries, remains highly focused on in-work support and sustainable labour market integration for former welfare recipients. This is exemplified by the Learn & Work Centre “Care & Cleaning” of Vitamin-W, which operates during the transition from unemployment to work, bringing with it a strong training component. In line with the current employability paradigm, it encourages workers to gain the competences required in the type of employment they are seeking and therefore only operates at the point of labour market entry. The *Jobcoach Network* steps in after people enter employment. It supports people who have already made the transition from unemployment to paid work, in order to give them the tools to keep their new post. It will become clear that the activities developed at the company *Harol* are aimed at employees who have been in the same job for a longer period. They are intended to help this group acquire the necessary knowledge to transfer to a different function, or at least to keep pace with the technological and organisational developments in the company. The rationale is to increase their employability and reduce their risk of unemployment.¹

The position of low-qualified workers in the labour market and lifelong learning in Flanders

This section aims to provide a general overview of the labour market situation of the low-qualified in Belgium and Flanders. The aim is to outline the context in which programmes for low-qualified workers operate.

First, the activity and unemployment rates for low-qualified workers in Belgium are described, *i.e.* the supply side of the labour market. Next the discussion approaches the labour market from a different angle: the skill-level and complexity of the jobs themselves, irrespective of the skill and educational level of the people active in the job – the demand side of the labour market. Thirdly, the chapter looks at participation in lifelong learning (LLL), with a particular focus on differential participation by level of qualification.

The supply side of the labour market

The activity rate of the Belgian population is considerably lower than the EU average. Policy makers have therefore agreed to concentrate their efforts on increasing this rate. The focus of the chapter is on low-qualified people who are active in the labour market. In defining this target group the educational level is taken as a reference, since this is the only criterion for which administrative and survey data are available. Table 6.1 below contains activity rates (*i.e.* employed and unemployed workers) for the “low-educated” in

Table 6.1. **Activity rates for the “low-educated” in Belgium, Flanders and the EU-15**

	1999	2000	2001	2002
Flemish region	49.2	49.0	47.6	48.6
Belgium	48.6	48.4	46.8	47.2
EU-15	57.3	57.2	55.0	55.4

Source: Eurostat, NIS Labour Force Survey (calculations by Steunpunt WAV).

Flanders, Belgium and the EU-15 countries. The figures show a roughly similar evolution, though with a persistent lag in both Flanders and Belgium.

The fact that Belgium has one of the lowest activity rates among EU countries is to a certain extent due to the low activity rates of the groups with the lowest educational level. The rates of middle- and higher-educated Belgians are very close to the average for the EU-15 countries. Table 6.2 offers a comparison of the activity rates for workers with low, middle and higher educational levels. It clearly illustrates an “educational gap” between the activity rates of, on the one hand, lower-educated and, on the other hand, middle- and higher-educated people. In 2002, the “educational gap” in Flanders was estimated at 1.79. This means that the proportion of people participating in the labour market is 79% higher for higher-educated people than for the low-educated. Compared to the EU as a whole, the activity rates of highly educated adults in Flanders score favourably, whereas those of low-educated individuals are lagging behind.

Table 6.2. **Activity rates by educational level, 2002**

	Educational level		
	Low	Middle	High
Flemish region	48.6	72.4	87.8
Belgium	47.2	70.1	86.0
EU-15	55.4	76.1	86.8

Source: Eurostat, NIS Labour Force Survey (calculations by Steunpunt WAV).

The rise of the educational level of the Belgian population thus inevitably results in a higher activity rate. Nevertheless, due to personal and social circumstances, a large number of individuals cannot be expected to reach a higher educational level as a means to increase their activity rate. Thus, if Belgian policy makers are to increase the overall proportion of working people, their efforts will need to focus primarily on the low-educated and low-qualified among the Belgian population.

A further indication of the current labour market situation of the low-qualified in Belgium is given by the unemployment rates of these groups. Table 6.3 shows that for the period 1999 to 2002, unemployment is substantially lower in Flanders than the EU average. However, the data may reflect some trade-off between unemployment and inactivity. Moreover, as in other EU countries, unemployment rates of low-educated people in Flanders and the rest of Belgium have fallen between 1999 and 2001. Due to the economic recession in 2002, unemployment rose in that year. Unemployment rates were relatively stable for all educational levels in the EU-15 countries; in Belgium and in Flanders they increased for all educational levels.

Table 6.3. **Unemployment rates of low-educated people, 1999-2002**

	1999	2000	2001	2002
Flanders	8.6	6.8	5.8	7.2
Belgium	13.7	11.2	10.0	11.7
EU-15	13.3	12.0	10.4	10.8

Source: Eurostat, NIS Labour Force Survey (calculations by Steunpunt WAV).

The demand side of the labour market

Of course, illustrating the growing proportion of high- and middle-educated people in Flanders and the considerably higher activity rates of these groups is not in itself sufficient. Thus, the discussion now focuses on the demand side of the labour market, *i.e.* on the availability of high- and lower-skilled jobs. PASO Flanders (Panel Survey of Organisations) provides an insight into the proportion of “low-qualified”, “experienced”, “trained”, “qualified” and “complex” work in Flanders (see Table 6.4 for a description of these categories).

Table 6.4. **Level of qualification of jobs**

Type of work	Training period	Education/experience	Independent decision making	Supervision
“Low-qualified”	Short	None	None	Direct
“Experienced”	Relatively short	Minimal	Limited	Direct
“Trained”	Relatively long	Special	Possible	On results
“Complex”	Long	Specific	Necessary	On results

Source: PASO Flanders.

Table 6.5 shows the proportion of workers employed in each of these categories. The findings are somewhat surprising. On the one hand, “knowledge work” seems to be the prevailing standard for the active population. On the

Table 6.5. **Proportion of employees in each level of qualification, by company size**

Type of work	Proportion of employees (%)	
	Organisations with < 10 employees	Organisations with > 10 employees
"Low-qualified"	17.5	19.0
"Experienced"	34.3	25.5
"Trained"	30.6	33.0
"Complex"	17.6	22.5

Source: PASO Flanders.

other hand, half of the employed Flemish people hold a job that is neither "trained", nor "complex". Almost one-fifth of the workforce holds a "low-qualified" job. Workers in occupations at that entry level only need a short training period, have little or no education and experience, do not take decisions independently and are under direct supervision.

The activity rates of middle- and highly educated people are significantly higher than those of low-educated people. The proportion of middle- and highly educated people appears to have grown steadily over the past decade. This resulted in a higher activity rate in Flanders.

Additionally, information about the qualification level of jobs in Flanders shows that a large number (approximately 50%) of jobs in the region do not require significant experience, training or education. Some of the people employed in these jobs might thus be "over-qualified" for their occupation.

Participation in continued education and training

A further striking aspect concerns the underinvestment in adult education and unequal participation in continued education and training. In 2001 the Vlaamse Gemeenschap (see APS, 2001, Chapter 25; Vanweddigen, 2002) carried out a survey on participation in lifelong learning during the previous twelve months among 1 500 adults aged between 18 and 85. This survey showed that 26.6% of the respondents had participated in training; however, the corresponding figure for university graduates was 60% against 4% for those with no more than primary education. Women, the elderly and economically inactive people appeared to participate less.

The European Labour Force Survey (LFS) reveals the same pattern, albeit drawing on a different definition (participation during the past four weeks) and sample (age group 25-64). As regards the gender division, however, the LFS suggests that women participate more, not less, than men. Table 6.6 shows that unemployed workers tend to participate more than those in employment, while the economically inactive are strongly underrepresented. Moreover, non-nationals participate more than Belgians (possibly due to participation in

Table 6.6. Participation of adults in education and training during the past four weeks, by gender, age, initial level of education, employment situation and nationality – Belgium and regions, 2001

	Belgium	Brussels region	Flemish region	Walloon region
Average (age group 25-64)	6.0	6.9	6.7	4.2
Gender				
Men	5.9	6.2	6.6	4.6
Women	6.0	7.6	6.9	3.9
Age				
25-39	8.4	10.0	9.3	6.3
40-49	6.0	5.9	7.0	4.3
50-64	2.8	2.8	3.5	1.6
Level of education				
Low (< = lower secondary)	2.2	2.9	2.4	1.8
Medium (upper secondary)	5.8	7.5	6.3	4.5
High (higher education)	11.3	10.5	13.2	8.0
ILO employment status				
In work	6.8	7.0	7.8	4.7
Unemployed	7.2	6.7	8.7	6.2
Inactive	3.7	6.7	3.7	2.9
Nationality				
Belgian	6.3	5.6	7.3	4.6
Other EU	6.0	8.5	7.8	3.7
Non-EU	9.9	7.9	12.3	(.)

(.) Less than 6 000 individuals in absolute figures.

Source: NIS Labour Force Survey (table produced by Steunpunt WAV, 2002).

language courses). Hence, inequalities in lifelong learning are of major concern when it comes to low-skilled and older workers.

The imbalance between supply and demand of highly educated and low-educated workers is not very large: a substantial number of entry-level jobs are available whereas the number of low-educated jobseekers is rather limited, due to their low labour market participation rates. However, this does not exclude the existence of matching problems within educational levels. Moreover, if the low activity rate displayed by low-educated workers is to be considered as a form of hidden unemployment (*e.g.* through early retirement or through “discouraged worker effects”, mainly among women), the issues facing the low-skilled may be much more severe than the figures suggest.

Thus the picture on the Flemish labour market is that of a strong cumulative disadvantage for low-educated adults, who are considerably underrepresented in adult education. To a lesser extent, the same holds for older workers and economically inactive adults.

Institutional and policy perspectives on lifelong learning

All stakeholders in Flemish policy are aware of the challenge of the knowledge-based society. In the Pact of Vilvoorde, concluded in 2001 between the government, the social partners and representatives of civil society, all parties agreed on a set of “21 objectives for the 21st century”. This pact makes achievement of a learning society a major objective for Flanders: by 2010, 10% of the population aged 25-64 is expected to participate in adult education. Secondly, it is stipulated that the overall functional literacy rate (including ICT literacy) must rise to 75% of the population; inequalities must be reduced in all aspects of LLL and access to further education must be guaranteed to all.

Without elaborating on the overall policy framework relating to LLL, the following section examines several work-related strategies deployed by the Flemish government and social partners for low-skilled workers.

The Flemish government’s Job Rotation Plan (Wisselbanenplan)

The Flemish labour market has for some time been dominated by major labour shortages: while many jobseekers cannot find work, many employers cannot find workers. As in other OECD countries, it is mostly the unskilled that have difficulty finding work, and there are too few skilled workers to employ, though the latter in turn often occupy jobs below their level of qualification. In addition, there are significant spatial disparities with labour shortages in southwest Flanders and surpluses in the north.

In the summer of the year 2000, the Flemish government approved the so-called Job Rotation Plan to address this problem. The policy paper of the minister of employment setting out the priorities for 2001-2002 explains that:

“The Job Rotation Plan aims to support companies that offer employees promotion via ‘mobility training’ and fill resulting vacancies with jobseekers. A job rotation is an operation involving an exchange of employees via single- or dual-track training:

- the incumbent employee is trained up to the level of the job appropriate to his/her abilities;
- the inserted job seeker is trained in the workplace for the new job that has become vacant (Landuyt, 2001).”

In fact, the Job Rotation Plan is not an isolated scheme with its own field of application, criteria of recognition and funding conditions. It is based on a “multiple choice” menu that draws together existing measures, from which an employer – within the limits of what is cumulatively possible² and in accordance with the conditions of each measure – chooses their own elements. Sector consultants have the task of promoting the scheme and advising employers on the available instruments.

Indeed, through this plan a range of measures that had hitherto existed alongside each other³ were linked for the first time and implemented or applied with slight modifications. To this end the funding rules of certain measures were revised. Some of these measures can be used for incumbent employees while others are applicable to newly inserted employees.

The instruments for the incumbent employee who moves on and so makes way for the inserted employee are mainly training instruments. These include the Flemish leverage grants – possibly combined with the national time credit (*tijdskrediet*); training vouchers for which the company applies on behalf of its employees; leverage grants for training and career guidance providers; and training and guidance vouchers (*opleidings- en begeleidingscheques*) for individual employees.

Work experience and training instruments are used for the inserted jobseeker. These include individual company training (IBO), insertion training, insertion departments, insertion interim, and workplace learning centres. Of course, the Job Rotation Plan is not really concerned with labour market (re-)integration of unemployed workers. Various actions plans have been put in place to foster employment sustainability.

The Flemish action plan for lifelong learning

The Flemish action plan for lifelong learning, adopted on 7 July 2000, consists of five broad items. Firstly, the government commits itself to guaranteeing sufficient starting qualifications through initial education so that school leavers are in an adequate competitive position when they enter the labour market for the first time. Secondly, the action plan aims at making information about permanent training and education more accessible, mainly through the creation of an interdepartmental body to co-ordinate all provision and dissemination of complete details about all courses on offer. Thirdly, permanent training and education should itself be made more accessible. Measures such as leverage credits (*hefboomkredieten*), training vouchers (*opleidingscheques*) and the training credit (*opleidingskrediet*) are meant to encourage participation in LLL. Fourthly, measures aimed at providing ICT skills for everyone are to be developed. Finally, the action plan also contains provisions for the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL).

In this context, two noteworthy achievements are particularly relevant to low-qualified workers: the Strategic Literacy Plan and the Certificate of Occupational Competences based on experiential learning.

The Strategic Literacy Plan

The Flemish government has recently elaborated a Green Paper on objectives (*Doelstellingnota*) for a Strategic Literacy Plan (*Strategisch Plan*

Geletterdheid).⁴ The paper acknowledges the rather polarised distribution of skills across the population, and the substantial share of adults with low literacy (approximately 15-18%). It notes that low literacy appears to affect not only one's work opportunities and income, but also one's behaviour as a citizen, as individuals with poor literacy tend to express less interest in participating in the public sphere. Yet basic education for adults currently reaches out to barely 0.65% of the adult population, mainly through language courses for (newly arrived) immigrants. The paper lists ten strategic objectives, one of which is a quantitative target: 72% of the population should reach "level 2" on the literacy scale by 2010.⁵

According to the Plan, the Flemish public employment service (VDAB) is expected to introduce a literacy screening test for all jobseekers embarking on a labour market integration pathway. Employers, trade unions and sectoral funds will be mobilised to invest in work-related literacy courses as well as incentives for workers to participate. "Dual tracks" combining literacy and job-related training will be developed. Special efforts will also be devoted to the accessibility of ICT courses and the use of ICT in literacy courses.

Certificate of occupational competences

In April 2004, the Flemish parliament adopted a decree that outlines the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). According to the decree, competences gained through formal or informal vocational training, but also through experience from previous employment or social activities, can be officially accredited. This should allow people to obtain a certificate of competence for a given occupation without actually holding the equivalent diploma. The advantages are numerous: social promotion according to seniority can be introduced, the skills of unqualified school leavers can be reassessed, jobseekers can upgrade their curriculum vitae, and labour market entrants can state their competences more clearly.

The procedure through which one can obtain official accreditation is open to the entire population. The Flemish government has appointed the Flemish Social and Economic Council (SERV) to draw up occupational profiles consisting of a detailed job description, which may then be used in deciding whether to recognise prior learning for given occupations. In the first instance, individuals looking for accreditation will first have to provide a list of all their acquired competences. A commission will then evaluate these competences through examinations and grant (or refuse) the recognition. In the latter case, the commission will inform each applicant which competence(s) he or she lacks. The applicant is then offered the opportunity to reapply after acquiring those missing competences.

The Flemish social dialogue on training: integrating skills and diversity issues

For a number of years, action plans have been agreed between the social partners and the government in the Flemish Economic and Social Consultative Committee (VESOC). Using subsidised collaborative agreements between government and companies, the Committee regularly establishes the causes of the underrepresentation of certain disadvantaged groups in the Flemish labour market. The earliest plans relate to the inequality of opportunity experienced by immigrants (1999-2000) and women (2000). Thus, diagnosis and remedy were supported by the Flemish government to address the issue of diversity within companies.

Through subsidies for preparation and implementation costs,⁶ which go hand in hand with a plan for diversity and proportional work participation, the Flemish government co-finances each approved dossier for up to two-thirds of the expenses incurred in relation to the action plan, up to a maximum of EUR 10 000. Companies, (public) institutions and (now) local authorities are eligible; each applicant can be funded only once. The intention is to develop an integrated diversity policy that will bring the employment rate of various disadvantaged groups – women, ethnic minorities, “older” employees, disabled persons, those with reduced or limited ability to work, the unskilled – to the same level as the average for the whole Flemish population.

One of the means of achieving the diversity agenda, according to the VESOC agreement for 2001-02, consists in encouraging greater mobility among companies.

The successive “VESOC action plans on diversity and proportional participation in work” were continued in 2003 and 2004. The plans aim at the removal of all obstacles to vertical and horizontal mobility of disadvantaged groups⁷ in the labour market. Projects run between six and twenty-four months and may comprise such measures as:

- Training programmes focused on the horizontal or vertical mobility of members of disadvantaged groups within the organisation.
- Coaching and internal guidance for new staff from the disadvantaged groups.
- Training sessions or programmes on intercultural communication, managing differences.
- Supervised placements and work experience placement for members of disadvantaged groups.

Vertical mobility relates to issues of access and promotion within the employing organisation. Horizontal mobility refers to the opportunity to work on the basis of one’s qualifications in any department of the employing

organisation, without being confronted with any form of direct or indirect discrimination, regardless of ethnic origin, gender, religious belief, handicap, age or sexual orientation.

The diversity plan must formulate concrete targets for intake, mobility and training to prevent early exits and labour market churning. In organisations with more than 50 employees, the diversity plan must be supervised by an internal working party (board or management, line managers, trade unions). The participating employing organisations must commit to continuing the diversification policy even after the period of subsidy. Over 800 diversity plans had been submitted by mid-2004. For the year 2004, the Flemish government provided a budget of EUR 2 250 000, for a total of 225 plans.

Table 6.7. **Social dialogue on training in Belgium**

Scale of governance	Field of competence	Type of action and instruments
Federal level	Wage formation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Funding (1.9% of the wage bill): sectoral funds – Earmarking (0.1% for at-risk groups among incumbents workers and jobseekers)
Regional level	Education and training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Sectoral covenants (including diversity policy and LLL) – Sectoral consultants (subsidised by the regional government)
Local level	Sub-regional employment committees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Local agreements on joint projects – Support for the design and implementation of measures

Specific instruments for the upskilling of low-qualified incumbent workers

Leverage grants

Leverage grants (*Hefboomkredieten*) are training and counselling subsidies specifically targeted at workers in enterprises. The intention is to encourage the adoption of professional HRM practices by companies so that they can achieve satisfactory competence management of their staff. Subsidies are awarded on a project basis, which implies a degree of diversity in the target groups and methodologies. Nevertheless, priority is given to employees from disadvantaged groups. Five types of actions can be subsidised to varying degrees, depending on the nature of the action. These are:

- Training related to innovations in the company.
- Career advice for individual employees (at their own request only).
- Support for training measures (competence development plans, design of instruments for the assessment of prior learning, new training systems, elimination of obstacles to participation in training).

- Internal work reorganisation (e.g. recruitment of jobseekers while incumbent employees are participating in training).
- “Conventional” training aimed at keeping up with developments in the business environment or in society as a whole.

Legal entities that meet the objectives described above are entitled to apply for the leverage grants. Organisations or enterprises funded through government grants or linked with the government through a management contract are excluded. The project must focus on the needs of employees employed in the private sector or in social profit companies receiving support from the “social Maribel plan”.⁸

The Flemish subsidies are co-financed by the European Social Fund (objective 3, priority 4). This priority aims, in the period 2000-06, to stimulate the adaptability of companies, their employees and jobseekers through, *inter alia*, training, human resources management, the development of new forms of labour organisation.

Projects are selected via an open call for proposals. Only a single dossier needs to be submitted, with which one can apply simultaneously for subsidy from the European Social Fund (ESF) and for the leverage loans (this is known as the “one-stop shop system”). The overall subsidy (Flemish government + ESF) varies between 27.5% and 75% and is limited to two years. In 2003, subsidies usually averaged a maximum of EUR 250 000, even if the applicant submitted multiple applications in the course of a single application round within this window.

So-called “bonus points” are awarded in the selection process to projects:

- Relating to developing methodologies that have 30% earmarked for disadvantaged groups. These are unskilled employees (with less than an upper secondary education certificate), people over 45 (except managers), disabled workers and non-EU ethnic minorities.
- That are focused on expanding a strategic training policy.
- That make use of ICT.
- That are focused on promoting social dialogue relating to permanent education in the vocational field.
- That are focused on companies with less than 50 employees.
- That link training policy to career policy.
- That originate from an applicant bound by the right to training or career guidance of employees as enshrined in a sector or company collective wage agreement.

There has been practically no evaluation of the effectiveness of company training for incumbent workers in Flanders. Matheus & Bollens (2001) estimated

the deadweight effect of ESF training subsidies to companies at about 50%.⁹ Their suggestion, to concentrate government aid on “supporting measures”, has been partly implemented, as highlighted above.

Their main conclusion, however, was that general measures to encourage company training do not offset (and indeed may reinforce) the “Matthew effect” in the distribution of training, since highly skilled workers tend to benefit more from the public subsidies than the low-qualified. Therefore, they suggested that government support be made more conditional on the level of qualification of participating workers.

This second recommendation has as yet not been implemented, apart from the fact that some degree of priority has been given to at-risk groups in recent regulations relating to leverage grants, as mentioned above. The most radical option would be to set quotas or to design measures targeted exclusively at the low-qualified. A softer approach consists in more intensive counselling measures, as the lack of awareness and information about useful training provision is probably greatest among low-qualified workers.

Training and guidance vouchers for employees (opleidings- en begeleidingscheques)

In the past it appeared that employers mainly financed training (whether or not subsidised) for the more advantaged groups among their employees. In addition, understandably, they invariably preferred company- or job-specific training at the expense of more general training. To a large extent, these findings also applied to a recent training voucher scheme developed for employers to promote training investments (Op den Kamp *et al.*, 2004). This is why the latest experiments have been conducted with training vouchers specifically for employees as opposed to employers.¹⁰

Employees can apply to the VDAB on their own initiative for training and career guidance¹¹ vouchers. The government provides half the cost in the form of a voucher; the remaining amount must be paid by the employee. According to the Flemish authorities,

Through these cheques the Flemish Government is trying to give employees the opportunity to improve their personal development and to choose a training course suited to their interests. Henceforth, independently of his employer, an employee can go in search of a training course that suits him best (Press release from Flemish government, 13 June 2003).

The employees targeted by this initiative are those who, at the moment of application for the cheques, are employed with an employment contract, or at least work under the authority of another person, irrespective of the type of contract. By the same token, the duration of the contract and the employment regime do not affect eligibility. The employee can apply to the VDAB for the

vouchers, via either the VDAB's website or its hotline service, or by visiting a local job centre.

A stipulation is made that the training course applied for must be partially or wholly unrelated to the present post of the employee, so that new skills are acquired. The underlying thinking is that these newly gained skills can be transferred to other companies or areas of work; thus the employee's general employability in the labour market is directly or indirectly improved.

After the training and/or guidance period, the (officially) approved provider supplies the employee with a certificate showing that he or she has completed the course concerned. Providers offering these services in the market may themselves receive subsidies via the leverage grants for career advice.

In addition, the training/guidance must take place outside normal working hours or during periods of legal suspension of the contract of employment (*e.g.* paid educational leave, social advancement or time credit in order to follow a course).

An employee may purchase a maximum amount of EUR 250 per year. The cheques have a value of EUR 5, 10 or 25. The Flemish community provides a contribution of 50% to the total amount of the vouchers; the rest is paid by the employee when purchasing them. However, the minister of employment may – after advice from the Social and Economic Council for Flanders (SERV) – allow reductions of or exemptions from the employee's half for well-defined target groups or training or guidance courses.¹² Early outcomes point to an unexpected success: in the first four months, almost 100 000 vouchers have been ordered – of which 15% were denied because the orders did not meet the legal regulations. However, no more than 13% of the vouchers have been used by individuals with less than an upper secondary education degree.

Sectoral covenants

As argued above, Belgium has a tradition of bi-annual collective agreements between the two sides of industry, at the interprofessional, sectoral and enterprise level. Moreover, separate negotiations are held in parallel between the Flemish social partners on issues that have been devolved to the regions. Sectoral agreements, at both the federal and Flemish levels, are most relevant in the field of education and training.

Sectoral agreements at the federal level are linked to the operation of sectoral funds, which are mainly devoted to training, and to the commitment to raise expenditure on LLL from 1.2% to 1.9% of the wage bill between 1998 and 2004. For the period 2004-10, the ambition has been set even higher: by 2010, one in every two workers should be participating in training. Most branches do have experience with training provision for at-risk groups

(youngsters in part-time or full-time vocational education, training for the unemployed, and low-skilled adult workers. They have set up their own yearly monitoring system (which appears to suffer from a lack of transparency).

Negotiations at the Flemish level include the Flemish government (Department of Employment as well as Education) and the public employment service (VDAB). Given the tight labour market in 2001, for example, agreements dealt mainly with education, lifelong learning and diversity, including the upskilling and integration of vulnerable groups. In 2003, the issue of geographic mobility of workers was added to the agenda. For each of these issues, commitments of the social partners can be matched with commitments of the government.

Sectoral covenants provide a framework that commits all employers of a branch on some points (e.g. compliance with the code of conduct); however, the general targets do not have to be met within each enterprise separately. Employers are expected to apply for support and to implement plans on the enterprise level on a voluntary basis.

Commercial employers are not the only ones involved in these sector covenants. Private non-profit employers as well as local governments are equally targeted. The covenants cover jobseekers as well as incumbent workers. Priority groups for the diversity plans include migrant workers and disabled persons. As for education and LLL, any disadvantaged group can be targeted.

The government finances the recruitment of sectoral consultants, who assist the social partners in implementing their sectoral plans and the preparation of dossiers for the engagement of the sectoral funds, provided that the sectoral plans are in conformity with a common grid and include concrete, quantitative targets. Firms within the sector must adhere to a code of conduct regarding non-discrimination.

By mid-2004, 23 branches had concluded sector covenants, and negotiations were ongoing in three other branches. Some potentially important sectors are as yet “missing”: the cleaning industry, the financial sector, the inland ports and the security services. Moreover, 79 sectoral consultants have been hired; these individuals liaise among themselves in three networks – education, LLL, and diversity.

Examples of targets include, *inter alia*, the number of enterprise diversity plans to be concluded within the next year; the share of migrant workers in training courses set up by the sector; and a yearly “diversity prize” for companies. Quotas relating to the employment of disadvantaged groups have not as yet been set.

It is too early for an assessment of outcomes. However, the negotiation of HRM strategies has obviously added a new dimension to the social dialogue.

The road has not been entirely smooth: insiders complain about the poor commitment of Flemish ministers other than those of employment and education. Also, covenants involving financing from sectoral funds have raised suspicion on the part of the European Commission (DG Competition), which regards this funding as a subsidy.

Intensive training measures for low-skilled unemployed workers: the example of Vitamin-W

This section focuses on two initiatives carried out by the Antwerp-based NGO Vitamin-W: the Learn & Work Centre “Care & Cleaning” course and the “Logistic Assistant” training courses for hospitals and homes for the elderly.

Vitamin-W is a private non-profit in charge of implementing various projects that offer sustainable employment to low-skilled welfare recipients. These two projects are noteworthy, as they seek to move away from the traditional distinction between a preliminary “training stage” and a labour market (re-)integration phase. In the Learn & Work Centre, jobseekers undergo a training course that largely takes place on the shop floor of a social enterprise. Moreover, they are remunerated for their participation in the course. In that way, the threshold between a period of investment in job training on the one hand and picking the rewards at a later stage on the other is considerably lowered, which may benefit the transition into the labour market. A similar combination of learning and “learning through work” is contained in the methodology and content of the Logistic Assistant training courses.

Vitamin-W: pioneer in social entrepreneurship

In the late 1980s, several small training and employment initiatives from the social profit sector in Antwerp were brought together to form Vitamin-W. The NGO acquired a considerable number of employees with a subsidised status and grew into a fairly large company with a staff of approximately 100 and some 90 “client-workers” on the payroll.

Vitamin-W is involved in a variety of partnership projects, some of which have turned into independent organisations. Many of these projects deal with the sustainable employment of low-qualified jobseekers through *e.g.* advisory services with regard to HRM practices for companies employing people from the target group or tailor-made training courses for individual companies, etc. The people interviewed emphasise the importance of scale economies and the co-operation with other actors involved. This is not only important for the joint development of a methodology and vision, but also for the overall practical organisation and general financing. Vitamin-W depends on various sources to finance its operation. A first structural form of financing is the large number of GESCO statutes (GESCO = a job scheme for the social profit sector)

available to recruit people. A second financial source is formed by structural funds, of which the ESF is the most important. Co-financing alongside these ESF resources comes from VDAB, the City of Antwerp and the Province of Antwerp.

As with many other non-profit organisations, the project-based financing of the activities conducted by Vitamin-W has a few major drawbacks. New, innovative projects are set up with project subsidies and methodologies are developed, implemented and evaluated – until the project subsidy is discontinued. In a number of cases, the acquired expertise and know-how are lost and can therefore not be adequately extended. One possible way of counteracting these problems in the future is to think about developing joint ventures with businesses.

The target group of Vitamin-W is broadly conceived; it includes the low-qualified and the long-term unemployed. For the “Logistic Assistant” training course that was examined as part of this research, the channelling mainly takes place through the VDAB. Jointly with the VDAB, the promoters of the training course organise an open day on “social profit”. Together with the word-of-mouth publicity, the open information event always generates great interest in the training course. Since the number of people interested in taking part in the projects tends to exceed the number of available places – and in order to safeguard the quality of the courses – the participants are carefully selected. The most important selection criterion is their motivation. For the Logistic Assistant training course, the VDAB carries out a pre-screening on the basis of the minimum qualification required, which is lower secondary education.

Obstacles to sustainable employment and career progression

People from the target group of Vitamin-W often struggle with recognisable problems that may constitute an obstacle for their recruitment and progression in the labour market. Apart from negative work attitudes they often have poor communication skills, including a poor knowledge of Dutch, insufficient job application skills and problems with basic skills (reading, writing, speaking). Even for low-qualified functions, the requirements are continually raised with respect to communication (in line with the requirement to deliver good service). This is particularly significant for the logistic assistants. On the *employer's side*, a number of factors may lead to low-qualified jobseekers seeing their possibilities of recruitment diminish. These include discrimination towards the target group, excessive expectations, and an unwillingness to invest in low-qualified (and hence replaceable) employees. Moreover, the general economic cycle also acts against the low-qualified: when there is an ample supply of workers in the labour market, these workers tend to have the fewest chances.

In the Learn & Work Centre as well as in the Logistic Assistant training course, the personal “obstacles” are tackled first. Apart from so-called soft skills, both initiatives also explicitly provide technical and job-specific competences.

Furthermore, Vitamin-W also establishes contacts with employers or creates tailor-made specific (social) workplaces. The scheme tries both to tackle the obstacles that exist on the employer’s side and to create an alternative work environment.

Principles and methodology of upskilling in the two projects run by Vitamin-W

Competence-based thinking is pivotal to the operation of Vitamin-W and hence also to the Learn & Work Centre (LWC) and the Logistic Assistant training course. People who take the course are systematically screened so that their basic, key and technical competences can be established. At the other end of the route followed by the participants are the “outflow profiles”. These (competence) profiles were drawn up by Vitamin-W for each of the training courses on offer, and are the training’s ultimate objective. The outflow profile defines the competences required in order to flow into the regular labour market after participating in an LWC or other course. Another crucial element is the combination of work and training. In the LWC, trainees receive a normal work contract for one year in the context of the Work Experience Plus (WEP+) programme, a welfare-to-work programme financed by the federal and regional governments.

After the initial competence screening, an individual learning route can be drawn up. This learning route consists (in the LWC Care & Cleaning) of practical work experience as well as various educational elements. The course lasts for twelve months and has several distinct stages: during the first three months, the participants get to know the job(s) they are being trained for and they learn the preconditions: mobility, contractual obligations, social skills, etc. Gradually (and depending on the course member), specific skills such as Dutch as a second language, ICT and driving skills are taught between the fourth and the ninth month. The formal training is alternated with placements in small groups under the supervision of a team leader, for the maintenance of rooms, companies, etc. The placements are usually half-time.

During the seventh to ninth month individual placements are organised, during which every participant learns to work without supervision. In the last three months, participants are also given intensive interview training. Following the training, some coaching (on-the-job) is organised for a proportion of the target group, until one year after recruitment.

The Logistic Assistant training course also combines work experience (including two placements) with various specific modules. Topics relating to homes and hospitals such as “lifting techniques” and “hygiene” are always covered, alongside the subjects that are also addressed in the LWC. Work attitudes implicitly feature throughout the courses. The instructors try to teach these attitudes through the work experience and the accompanying guidance.

The Learn & Work Centre and the Logistic Assistant training courses use a wide-ranging methodology. The teaching resources and textbooks are developed by the instructors and by those developing the methodology. Sometimes lessons are held in classes, but the instructors mostly try to work actively and interactively. Since many participants have little experience with traditional methods of learning in class, the instructors are required to be creative.

Outcomes and main lessons from this case study

The effectiveness of both initiatives is influenced by the general economic situation, policy measures and the time span covered by the assessment. The LWC usually manages a flow-through of 50% to sustainable work.

It is estimated that approximately 95% of all Logistic Assistant participants find work after the course. Halfway through the course, an interim evaluation takes place because it is still possible at that stage to make adjustments. The adjustments also positively influence the flow-through figures to paid work.

The main lessons to be drawn from this case study can be summarised as follows: even temporary employment can lead to sustainable labour market integration and employment progression, provided that training and work placements are designed in a mutually reinforcing way. The work contract strengthens the motivation to learn and the opportunities for work-based learning, while the work placements also provide the necessary experience demanded by many employers. At the same time, the training is carefully designed to be a tailor-made pathway between the individuals' actual competences and the required starting competences in their future jobs.

As to the question of whether pathways as long as twelve months are affordable for maintenance jobs, the answer is unambiguously positive. Such pathways turn out to be very profitable investments for the government budget and, *a fortiori*, for society as a whole.

The main difficulty signalled by the management of Vitamin-W relates to its financing through project subsidies. Respondents furthermore emphasised that the collaboration with several parties and the economies of scale achieved within Vitamin-W were crucial for the growth, financing and success

of the organisation. It can be said that Vitamin-W, through the upscaling it achieved, tried to protect itself against and deal with the insecurity and instability involved with project-based subsidies. The social profitability of this kind of labour market service suggests that a more secure subsidy framework would be justified.

The organisation's relationships with the public employment service and the Flemish government are both constructive and extremely important. Vitamin-W perceives its own role as the "sag wagon". While the metaphor clearly suggests its aim is to care for the most hard-to-place – indeed, that is the strength of the organisation – it also casts some doubt on the extent to which the VDAB feels responsible *vis-à-vis* those groups. The Vitamin-W management further feels that it has insufficient opportunities for communication with the government and limited say in the design of policies towards their trainee workers.

In-work support for low-skilled re-entrants: the example of the Jobcoach Network

The Jobcoach Network is a project based in the City of Ghent. Its main feature is that mentoring by a jobcoach begins only after recruitment, precisely at the moment when many traditional forms of counselling end. The central objective of jobcoaching is the sustained employment of new employees.

Origin of the initiative

The jobcoaching methodology originated from a need perceived by the local employment centre of Ghent. Originally, jobcoaching was not a formally recognised practice; coaching was organised and financed in the context of:

- Individual company training (*individuele beroepsopleiding in ondernemingen – IBO*).
- Diversity plans.
- Learning island and Interface projects.
- Employment clauses in contracts between the City of Ghent and external contractors (for example, a company is allowed to carry out work for the local authority on the condition that it recruits a prescribed number of people from certain disadvantaged groups).

Experience with jobseekers post-placement revealed that many low-qualified people would benefit from external guidance after starting employment. The reason for this is because employers often invest insufficiently in the reception and guidance offered to people who are not familiar with a professional environment and the company culture they join.

From May 2002 to May 2004, the Jobcoach Network was financed by the ESF as an EQUAL project.¹³ In a first phase, the “Jobcoaching” project was subjected to some fine-tuning: experiences were assembled and cross-referenced with some expert views. The results were gathered in a handbook for jobcoaches, who were also provided with a newly developed training course. This process constituted the first of three phases of this three-year EQUAL project: the preparation phase (November 2001 to April 2002); the implementation phase (May 2002 to May 2004); and the dissemination phase (May 2004 to November 2004).

In 2003, the former Flemish minister of Employment, Renaat Landuyt, made additional resources available to the entire Flemish community for jobcoaching to be extended. The VDAB will take over the jobcoaching in most cases. Within the Jobcoach Network of Ghent, the resources will provide for an additional six coaches, each able to deal with an annual caseload of approximately 50 employees to be guided. An important limitation of these funds is that they are earmarked for three specific target groups: the disabled, ethnic minorities, and workers aged over 45.

Organisation and structure

The Jobcoach Network is a partnership of six organisations: the local employment centre of the City of Ghent, the NGO Job & Co., the Chamber of Commerce, the Christian trade union ACV, the VDAB, and the partnership “Ghent, City at work”. The jobcoaches are seconded from three partner organisations: four are from VDAB, one is from Job & Co. and one from the local employment centre.

Principles

The objective of jobcoaching is the *sustainable employment of new employees* from the target group. This target group is described as “jobseekers from the disadvantaged groups”, which reflects a rather broad view of “low-skilled workers”. The Jobcoach Network bases its action on the principle of diversity, which is understood as a broad variation between different employees as opposed to a simplistic dichotomy between advantaged and disadvantaged workers. All employees, i.e. the entire team and organisation into which the new employee is recruited, are required to make an effort in order to facilitate his or her integration and participation. In this sense, the entire HR management is challenged to adapt to the new circumstances, not solely the individual. Thus from the outset, the Jobcoach Network takes a *systemic approach* to providing guidance to new employees. All members of the organisation (new and existing) need to participate (and to be coached) in the integration process.

The guidance has a *preventive* dimension, in that the jobcoach seeks to keep the new employee from failing to integrate into the company (which would result in labour market churning). Furthermore, the guidance is ideally only *short term*, in the hope that employees will be able to persevere at work without the support of an external coach.

Finally, it should be noted that a jobcoach only offers guidance with regard to “soft” factors and competences. Help with acquiring technical, professional and specific competences relating to the company organisation is seen as the responsibility of the employer. These skills are expected to be learned on the job.

Obstacles to sustainable employment for the low-qualified

The target group of the Jobcoach Network consists of people who have already been recruited and who are therefore deemed to be competent by the employer for the function they will carry out. However, it appears that many low-qualified people face a host of obstacles to remaining in sustained employment. Interviews with jobcoaches, co-ordinators, an employer and an employee lead the authors to distinguish between three main types of obstacles.

Competences of the employee

A first barrier relates to the competences held by individual employees. These refer to the skills, attitudes, knowledge and experience required to carry out a function.

Virtually all parties interviewed mention a lack of appropriate work attitudes as a stumbling block. Examples include not arriving at work on time, unjustifiable absence from work and failure to notify the employer of an absence in advance. This is linked to a lack of motivation on the part of some employees, often caused by a poor self-image.

Social and communication skills are crucial nowadays in many jobs, next to the purely technical skills and professional expertise. Closely related to these are the “job application skills”.

Jobcoaches also point out that low-qualified employees have inadequate “self-sufficiency” (*i.e.* an ability to act independently). In a few cases, the employees have already taken part in work experience programmes, and been offered a high level of guidance and support. As soon as they take on a regular job however, the support stops and they are directly responsible for the paperwork, the negotiation with the employer, etc. – which to some is difficult to address.

Characteristics of the employer

All parties involved mention prejudices held by employers against low-qualified employees and jobseekers as a significant impediment for the sustained employment of this group. Generally, two causes are cited for the prejudice: 1) a lack of experience and familiarity with the group, and 2) previous negative experiences with the target group – for example, with people who were forced to apply for work.

Moreover, employers also often prefer to “play it safe”. When companies can attract people with relevant work experience and an attractive profile, those people will be given preference over low-qualified applicants. The business cycle also naturally plays an important role. When there are shortages on the labour market, employers are more inclined to recruit low-qualified staff, because they can rely on the group being given free guidance by an external jobcoach.

For instance, when facing labour shortages and in order to find the required workforce, a local McDonald’s franchise holder decided to recruit low-qualified jobseekers. They considered seeking guidance from the Jobcoach Network. A fairly large group was recruited and given guidance, and approximately half eventually remained in the company’s employment for a longer period of time. As mentioned before, autonomy and social and communication skills are important for the recruitment and retention of low-qualified employees. Employers, in turn, need to provide the necessary guidance for new employees. In practice this is not always the case, and when it isn’t people with little experience and self-confidence are more likely to experience problems during the first months of their employment.

Circumstantial factors

Lastly, a number of circumstantial factors affect the sustained integration of low-qualified people in the labour market. The influence of the *general economic situation* on demand has already been mentioned. People from that group are often the last to be recruited and the first to be dismissed when the company is faced with excess staff.

Furthermore, in some cases this target group is hindered by being less mobile, which means that not all companies (for instance, those outside the scope of public transport) can be reached – a situation worsened by the high cost of childcare.

The jobcoaching process

A jobcoach always operates as an external expert who provides guidance within the company at the request of the employer. The coach aims to help the new employee integrate successfully and efficiently into their new work

environment, but the coaching does not extend to the specifics of a given company culture.

After the appointed coach has been briefed by Jobcoach Network on the employees, their job and the company they are working for, the introduction phase gets under way. That involves the coach discussing with the immediate supervisors and/or managing director the culture, working environment and expectations with regard to the employee. There follows a first discussion with the employee, during which the coach explains his/her role and hears the employee's expectations. On the basis of the discussion, both parties agree to the aspects that the coaching will focus on. These agreements are recorded in a coaching contract.

The actual coaching sessions mostly take place during the first two months of the employment, after which their frequency gradually decreases. In most cases, the coaching is wound up when the employer is of the opinion that the employee is sufficiently integrated and no longer requires coaching. As stated earlier, the attention is mostly directed at "soft factors": attitudes to work and circumstantial factors in the company and social environment of the employee. Lastly, the coaching is evaluated with the employer and employee.

The process set out above is the "ideal" one proposed by Jobcoach Network. Because each employee and work situation is different, no two coaching processes will follow exactly the same pattern. As the contract time passes, employees increasingly have the opportunity to contact their coach when they face problems. These problems can vary significantly; they often relate to various preconditions influencing the employment situation. They may for example be related to the geographical accessibility of the company, to childcare or to salary and paperwork-related issues.

An entire coaching course takes an average of between 25 and 30 hours of guidance per employee.

Role of the jobcoach in terms of upskilling

Interviews with the parties involved reveal that there is a distinction between the immediate short-term effects and long-term influence of jobcoaching.

Jobcoaching essentially tries to address the development of *social and communicative skills and work attitudes*. Jobcoaches as well as employers nevertheless indicate that results in this respect can only be achieved over a longer period. The role played by a jobcoach with respect to fulfilling preconditions (mobility, administration, etc.) is therefore more noticeable in the short term.

The methodology of jobcoaching does not offer the possibility to teach employees particular skills within a short period. A jobcoach tries to

familiarise the employee with the *expectations* of employers with regard to specific skills and attitudes. Through this awareness-raising process and regular feedback, the employee should develop the necessary competences. This method clearly puts certain demands on the employee and furthermore does not always produce instant results. The coach does not play a supervising let alone sanctioning role, which means that the success of the guidance and of the learning effects depends to a large extent on the motivation of the employee concerned. The interviewees for this study were all convinced that jobcoaching makes a valid contribution to the “upskilling” of low-qualified employees, but acknowledge that the learning process takes time. One significant precondition is that the employee and jobcoach establish a relationship of mutual trust so that the desired learning effects can be achieved.

Since jobcoaching takes a systemic approach from the beginning, the employer and colleagues are also involved in the guidance. The jobcoach will try and explain to them the situation of the new employee, and help them understand his or her educational needs. The most important result that can be achieved among employers and colleagues is a pattern of positive expectations with regard to low-qualified newcomers.

Outcomes

Jobcoach Network’s objective is to integrate at least 70% of the employees successfully. The criterion for success is that an employee remains at work with the employer for a prolonged period and that the parties involved (beginning with the employer) no longer deem the coaching necessary because the employee is sufficiently integrated in the company.

The initial results as well as the experience of the parties involved suggest that the target of 70% is very ambitious. Of the 59 beneficiaries who began the course in 2003, 39 (65.5%) completed it successfully, 10 pulled out and 10 carried over to 2004. One of the reasons quoted for the moderate success is the fact that employees referred by counsellors of the VDAB are often difficult to coach.

Jobcoach Network uses a broad diversity concept, not wishing to distinguish between various target groups. This vision is to a certain extent validated by the effectiveness of the guidance. The success rate does not differ by target group (*e.g.* by race, gender, etc.). Only the “prior history” of the participant may play a role. Someone who already participated in a route counselling project for jobseekers would have a better idea of what to expect from a coach, and that would make the guidance run more smoothly.

When an external coach comes to the shop floor to guide a new employee, the question arises whether this may lead to a further stigmatisation of the new

employee. In particular cases, the target group already runs a greater risk of stigmatisation by the employer and/or colleagues. However, the jobcoaches involved in this survey did not report any problems in this respect. It is important that all colleagues and immediate supervisors from the employee's environment are involved in the coaching process from the start. They should be made aware of the role of the jobcoach and of the reasons why the coaching is considered to be beneficial. This method prevents conflicts with colleagues.

A further observation concerns the relationship between jobcoaches and trade union delegates within the company, as both are to some extent responsible for the well-being of the newly recruited workers. Clear communication from the start and a clear division of roles (with the coach caring for human relations and the delegate for the promotion of rights) have proved effective in preventing any misunderstandings in this respect.

Main lessons and perspectives from this case study

The example of the Jobcoach Network may at first glance seem rather *atypical* in the context of research on “upskilling”, as it relates more to guidance and counselling than genuine job training. Nevertheless, the selection of this case seems justified for two reasons. First, it does contain obvious elements of upskilling, albeit in the area of “soft skills” such as punctuality, communication, etc. The way in which these skills are developed is informal: participation in the jobcoaching process would probably not even be reported by the employee as “participation in continued education or training” in surveys about LLL. Secondly, the example demonstrates that this type of upskilling is typically embedded in a broader approach aimed at removing a range of potential obstacles to sustainable employment *e.g.* administrative, social, human and practical. At the same time, it is clear that upskilling is to some degree a collective process within a “learning organisation”.

As new financial resources are provided by the Flemish government in order to extend jobcoaching to the whole of Flanders, the Flemish public employment service VDAB has started to play a more prominent role. From these interviews it appears that there is some disquiet among the pioneers about the extent to which VDAB plans to put the experience gained by the Jobcoach Network into practice and build on it. It is essential that the VDAB coaches are trained for their new role according to the methodology and manual developed within the EQUAL project.

Moreover (as mentioned above), VDAB plans to restrict the extended jobcoaching services to three target groups (the disabled, ethnic minorities and workers aged over 45). Members of the Jobcoach Network interviewed as part of the study argued that this practice is at odds with the broad diversity principle that the Jobcoach Network adheres to for its activities. VDAB

representatives reply that a narrower focus is inevitable due to the upscaling of the measure and the limited resources available.

Workplace training for incumbent workers: the example of Harol

Background to the initiative

The company Harol is a producer of roller shutters, sun blinds and sectional garage doors located in Diest (see map in Annex 5.A1). Set up as a family company over fifty years ago, the company now employs 240 labourers and 90 office staff. A host of initiatives were set up with the objective of developing the competences of a few low-qualified groups in co-operation with the Sub-regional Employment Committee (STC) of Leuven, a local consultative committee made up of delegates of employee organisations, employers' organisations, local governments, the VDAB, the Flemish region and private training and employment organisations. In this case study, the focus is primarily on those undertaken for the so-called "team leaders" (foremen). Harol came into contact with STC Leuven following a recruitment drive and a training course for a group of migrant workers in the company. The contact sparked off an initiative to develop a diversity plan and a training and education project for low-qualified employees with many years of service. The company had a fairly large pool of employees that it wanted to train to be team leaders in the context of a restructuring of its labour force. However, these workers did not all possess the necessary competences, so that some "upskilling" was deemed necessary.

In the late 1990s Harol faced two important challenges. First, the production system needed to be optimised and changed from a "push" (*i.e.* supply-driven) to a "pull" (order-driven) system. Secondly, changes in the production system led to the need for staff to have different competences and for the "upskilling" of low-qualified colleagues.

Management took the decision to let the optimisation of the production system coincide with the "upskilling" of the labourers in the company. The decision to invest in the competences of incumbent employees was essentially driven by social reasons, *i.e.* issues of mutual loyalty between the employer and workers. A large-scale conversion programme was set up around five action points: Quality, Cost, Delivery, Morale and Safety. The new production system was largely based on Toyota's "traditional" system, a method based on leadership and responsibilities that are integrated at as low a level as possible in the organisation's hierarchy. Management tried to support the reorganisation of work by undertaking a number of actions with a great leverage effect. The main action was the upskilling of the relatively low-qualified team leaders in the company. This group of employees had originally been recruited as apprentices and therefore had many years of service that

gave them comprehensive technical and company-specific know-how. Since the company wanted to exploit these competences fully, it chose to give the group the opportunity to develop into team leaders. It required them to develop competences in two areas: the extension of their technical knowledge and skills, and the acquisition of specific management skills.

These factors were behind the fairly comprehensive education and training process that took place at Harol. The activities were carried out in the context of a diversity plan, in co-operation with the Sub-regional Employment Committee of Leuven.

The target group and the intended competences

The target group mostly consisted of employees aged between 45 and 50 who were originally recruited by Harol when aged between 16 and 18. This long tenure means that the employees had a comprehensive knowledge of the company and its production and that their technical know-how was well developed. These competences had developed through years of practical experience while watching the production processes grow from those of a small family company to those of a medium-sized company.

Following restructuring, the function of the target group changed considerably. Team leaders constitute the lowest level of management in the company. They have responsibilities within the production process and are also expected to coach a team of labourers. Clearly, not everyone had the necessary competences to carry out this new function. The main problems were situated in the following areas:

- *Long-term thinking and vision:* for years, the employees had been performing labour focused purely on immediate results. In their new role, they had to co-ordinate work and plan it over time.
- *Flexibility and openness* for new situations and challenges.
- *Leadership:* team leaders (or foremen) are given certain responsibilities with relation to the HR management of their team. This involves, *inter alia*, coaching, appraisals and performance interviews. Apart from interview techniques, these responsibilities also require assertiveness and other communication and social skills.
- *IT-skills:* the new role, as well as the restructuring of the production process, requires that team leaders themselves input data into the computer system.

Content of the upskilling activities

In the initial phase, an external consultant (Manpower) was enlisted to assess the competences of all the employees in the target group. More

specifically, an assessment of their management capabilities was made; their objectives were tested on the basis of personality tests, IQ-tests and interviews. Following this stage, attempts were made to close the gaps with existing competences through education and training activities.

The second round of the project started with training on the subject of appraisals, given by the external consultant Novare. After the training, the team leaders were expected to conduct appraisals of their own team members. Initially they received help from their departmental head, but later they were expected to carry out these tasks by themselves. Interviews with the HR manager and a team leader revealed that these prospects initially gave rise to concern among the team leaders.

In the third phase, the team leaders were guided by a consultant from the company Obelisk, who instructed them on how to take initiatives on their own and to work methodically. In co-operation with an external expert, the HR manager then worked out a step-by-step plan with the aim of developing *Personal Development Plans (Persoonlijke Ontwikkelingsplannen – POP)* for team leaders and department managers. The objective was to ensure that team leaders would eventually be able to develop personal development plans for their team members.

Beyond these formal training courses, collective learning was also carried out in interactive fashion, by means of a “forum” for team leaders, foremen and departmental heads. The forum meets regularly to discuss a wide range of topics.

At the beginning this learning method caused some unease. The participants had previously only performed manual labour and they were oriented towards seeing actual, tangible results. Participation in meetings where they had to make suggestions and actively discuss managerial issues was diametrically opposed to the employees’ usual work routines.

The launch of the forum also required some adjustment from the higher management levels. The traditional communication pattern – from the top down – needed to be abandoned. The increased responsibilities of first-line management indeed made it necessary for responsibilities and communications to be entrusted to workers below them in the hierarchy. With the upskilling of the lower-qualified employees, the other hierarchical levels of the organisation faced a number of changes.

Actors involved

The HR department and HR manager appeared to be key drivers in this initiative. STC Leuven also played a significant role in drawing up Harol’s diversity plan. As mentioned above, the STC is a key partner. It acts as a contact point for all labour market issues and it takes care of co-ordinating

labour market policies within the district concerned (in this case, Leuven). The STC also develops projects in companies, giving advice on the implementation of labour market policy in the region, and keeps a watchful eye over the fair treatment of jobseekers through an ombudsman's office.

One of the tasks of the STC is to help companies draw up diversity plans, to encourage diversity and proportional participation in the labour market. This can entail initiatives in the field of recruitment and selection, education and training, literacy and numeracy, and miscellaneous intercultural subjects. In the case of Harol, support from the STC was crucial in drawing up the diversity and training plans.

Furthermore, a number of external agencies were enlisted to provide the actual training courses. Manpower looked after the initial screening of all team leaders, and the Novare and Obelisk agencies carried out the training. The advantage of external instructors is their independent position. In the context of a far-reaching restructuring of the company, these agents are usually perceived and accepted as a neutral party by the employees. Finally, the sectoral training institute contributed to the content of the training.

Financing

Naturally, the upskilling programme was primarily financed by Harol itself. Various grants and subsidies supplemented the financing, including a grant earmarked for diversity planning. This helped subsidise part of the preparation phase. Harol's management indicated that without the subsidy, initiatives for upgrading the skills of its staff would still have gone ahead but on a smaller scale. Alongside the system of diversity plans, Harol also made use of the system of training vouchers for employers and of the *Zilverpasplan*. The latter involves measures and actions aimed at stimulating the proportional representation in the labour market of older employees. The actual procedure of the *Zilverpasplannen* is relatively similar to that of the diversity plans, with the Flemish government providing a subsidy covering two-thirds of the total cost.

Outcomes

The overall objective for the company was to *optimise the production process*. The management of Harol wanted to shorten delivery times and increase overall production efficiency. Improvements were subsequently reported in three areas:

- A considerable reduction in delivery times.
- A decrease in production costs. During the first year of the reorganisation production costs rose, because many employees attended courses on a

regular basis and the productivity of the workforce naturally decreased. After the first year, the costs nevertheless fell to below the starting level.

- Considerably improved quality. During the first year of the new production process, the number of complaints fell by 50%, in the following year they fell by 30%.

From the employer's perspective, these outcomes were of course the prime objective of the entire process. Furthermore, approximately half of the target group were able to attain the function of "team leader"; other solutions were found for the other half. Some were made technical officers, because these positions were better suited to their abilities and professional ambitions. Team leaders consequently acquired practical competences allowing them to fulfil their new role. Furthermore, the training had a positive effect on their self-esteem and confidence.

Main lessons from this case study

The Harol case illustrates the possibilities available to firms undergoing structural changes to upgrade the skills of their incumbent employees. Despite their high seniority and apparently stable job careers, it suddenly appeared that the workers who underwent a period of training would otherwise have been at risk of losing their jobs.

The interest of this case undoubtedly lies in the convergence between economic and social objectives: while economic motives (raising productivity and competitiveness) triggered the project, its implementation eventually rested upon a diversity plan focusing on the social advancement of older low-educated workers. The results demonstrate that the upskilling plan was a profitable investment for the company.

The case also illustrates that upskilling reaches beyond the objective of individual integration: it was an integrated part of a comprehensive plan with economic objectives, a related HRM plan for the whole firm, and personal development plans for workers. As in the case of job coaching, it clearly appears that the upskilling of individuals cannot be approached in isolation from the reorganisation of the workplace.

Harol made use of various instruments and the support of various actors marshalled through social dialogue at different levels: federal (sectoral fund), regional (diversity plan) and local (the STC). Co-ordination of these instruments greatly facilitated the smooth implementation of the entire process.

Finally, the case shows that so-called vulnerable groups of workers are capable of learning and adapting to a new work environment and new technologies, provided that the firm's HRM policy prioritises their well-being.

Conclusions

Each of the three cases has revealed the importance accorded “soft skills” as a key to job retention and upgrading. Without ignoring the importance of technical and vocational training, all project promoters have stressed the need to invest in work attitudes, communication skills, interview techniques, time management, etc.

Secondly, initiatives carried out by Vitamin-W and the Jobcoach Network that were targeted at the most disadvantaged groups took on a holistic approach in which the demarcation line between training and guidance is hard to draw. Moreover, all obstacles threatening sustainable integration and employment progression were addressed more or less simultaneously; issues related to medical care, social assistance, mediation, income security, mobility, child minding etc., were all tackled simultaneously, bringing together a variety of stakeholders. Partnership with supporting services is indispensable for success in this field. The case of Harol was holistic in a different sense, as it combined economic and social objectives, linked training in technical and soft skills with the reorganisation of work, and covered the whole firm.

Thirdly, the duration and intensity of the training and coaching periods were proportional to the obstacles facing the low-skilled. Longer pathways inevitably involve major direct and indirect costs, as they are labour-intensive. Private non-profit organisations have often acted as pioneers in this field. Despite growing collaboration with the VDAB, they remain critical and urge the public service to invest more in disadvantaged groups. The Vitamin-W management sees itself as the subcontractor hired for the “hard-to-place”, with the VDAB catering more for the “easy-to-place” jobseekers. In Ghent, as the deadline for takeover of the job coaching methodology by the VDAB approaches, the promoters tend to become more anxious about possible cutbacks and reorientation of objectives. Inevitably, the public employment service will need to invest more in training its own staff as well as in extending existing provision for the low-qualified – otherwise, it may end up with a watered-down version of the initial concepts. Additionally, segmentation of the “market” may lead to stigma and other perverse effects. A more balanced partnership should instead be essentially based on mutual complementarities and joint learning.

The representatives of the Flemish government interviewed in the course of this research expressed their concern about the need for improvements to existing measures promoting lifelong learning and sustainable jobs for low-qualified workers in general and disadvantaged groups in particular. It must be admitted that the present unequal participation in lifelong learning reproduces and indeed tends to reinforce the uneven distribution of initial

education among adults. On the other hand, we have seen that a whole raft of measures are already available, some of which appear to be quite successful.

Nonetheless, even if general vocational training instruments such as vouchers are available to all, they do not necessarily suit the needs of the low-skilled. The chapter has shown that Flemish policy remains centred on welfare-to-work strategies for vulnerable groups. A clear policy objective of the present and previous Flemish coalitions has been to increase the rate of employment, and there appears to be no regional or national strategic focus on the low-skilled. Difficulties in co-ordinating federal supervision of vocational and regional competency for active labour market policies have not helped to construct specific strategies for low-skilled incumbent workers.

To some extent, the Flemish government and social partners have sought to link their strategies to those of federal institutions, mainly through the adoption of a modest increase in payroll contributions to the sectoral funds, earmarked for both vulnerable unemployed and employed workers. Moreover, in recent years, increasing attention has been paid to strategies combining training with employment, as well as with HRM innovations. This is illustrated by dual training-employment schemes and by the use of the job rotation approach as a general framework for most of the existing measures. However, it remains to be seen whether these marginal changes will actually benefit low-skilled workers.

Notes

1. The authors would like to thank all interviewees (managers, advisors, workers, trainees, unionists, civil servants) who took part in this study. They are also grateful to the steering group members of the Flemish background report for their useful feedback and suggestions (see also Verlinden *et al.*, 2004).
2. Not so much between subsidies for the employee *in situ* and the insertion of a jobseeker, but between the various possible subsidies for each of the parties separately.
3. Examples of measures integrated into the Job Rotation Plan include individual company training (*Individuele Beroepsopleiding in Ondernemingen* – IBO), the insertion department (*invoegafdeling*), leverage grants (*hefboomkredieten*), VESOC action plans (VESOC = Flemish Economic and Social Consultative Committee) and training vouchers (*opleidingscheques*) for companies.
4. At the time of writing, the Strategic Literacy Plan had not yet been implemented by the Flemish government.
5. Level 2 is generally agreed as the minimum level of functional literacy in advanced knowledge societies.
6. The subsidies are designed to take the preparatory steps toward integrating disadvantaged groups in the labour process – they are not an employment subsidy.

7. Categories of persons of working age whose employment rate is lower than the average for the whole Flemish working population.
8. The “social Maribel” operation involves reduced social security contributions in exchange for an equivalent increase in employment.
9. The deadweight effect of a number of other ALMP measures was found to be much higher; in some cases, it was estimated at 80-90%.
10. Previously, only employers could buy training vouchers for up to EUR 6 000/year (also with a 50% subsidy). This system is maintained, but supplemented with a new scheme for employees.
11. “Guidance” refers to career guidance and competence development and assessment, i.e. all advice and services aimed at guiding an employee in the further development of their career and/or participation in a pathway in which assessment of competences is central.
12. The scheme had just begun operating at the time of writing.
13. The European Community Initiative EQUAL is funded through the ESF and runs from 2000 to 2006. See http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/equal/index_en.cfm.

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ANNEX 6.A1

Figure 6.A1.1. **The Flemish region of Belgium and the location of the three cases studied in this chapter**



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Acronyms

AE	Adult Education (<i>Voksenuddannelse</i>) (Denmark)
AF	<i>Arbejdsformidlingens</i> – Name of the Danish Public Employment Service
AHRE	Alberta Human Resources and Employment (Canada)
AMU	Adult Vocational Training (<i>Arbejdsmarkedsuddannelserne</i>) (Denmark)
APEL	Accreditation of prior experiential learning (Flanders)
AVU	General Adult Education (<i>Almen VoksenUddannelse</i>) (Denmark)
AWES	Alberta Workforce Essential Skills (Canada)
BLOs	Business Links Operators (UK)
CEGEP	Collège d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel (Quebec)
CET	Continuous Education and Training
CPPI	Canadian Petroleum Products Institute
CTHRC	Canadian Trucking Human Resource Council
CVT	Continuing Vocational Training
DDMI	Diavik Diamond Mines Inc. (Canada)
ERIC	Effective Reading in Context (Canada)
ESF	European Social Fund
ESRP	Essential Skills Research Project (Canada)
ESWL	Essential Skills and Workplace Literacy (Canada)
ETPs	Employer Training Pilots (UK)
FOA	Public Employees's Union (<i>Forbundet af Offentlige Ansatte</i>) (Denmark)
FVU	Preparatory Adult Education (<i>Forberedende VoksenUddannelse</i>) (Denmark)
GCSEs	General Certification of Secondary Education (UK)
GED	General Equivalency Diploma (Canada)
GVU	Basic Adult Education (<i>Grunduddannelse for voksne</i>)
HF	Higher Preparatory Examination
HHX	Higher Commercial Examination
HTX	Higher Technical Examination
IAG	Information Advice and Guidance
JARC	Jane Addams Resource Corporation (US)
KAD	Women Workers' Union in Denmark (<i>Kvindeligt Arbejderforbund</i>)

LIRI	Local Industrial Retention Initiative (US)
LLL	Lifelong Learning
LMDAs	Labour Market Development Agreements (Canada)
LSEq	Low Skill Equilibrium
LO	Danish Federation of Trade Unions (<i>Landsorganisationen i Danmark</i>)
LSCs	Learning and Skills Councils (UK)
MOWD	Mayor's Office of Workforce Development (US)
NNSP	The National Network of Sector Partners (US)
NVQs	National Vocational Qualifications (UK)
PES	Public Employment Service
RAR	Regional Labour Market Council (<i>Regionale Arbejdsmarkeds Råd</i>) (Denmark)
SERV	Flemish Social and Economic Council (Flanders)
SID	General Workers' Union in Denmark (<i>Specialarbejderforbundet i Danmark</i>)
SSDA	Sector Skills Development Agency (UK)
SMEs	Small and medium-sized enterprises
STC	Sub-regional Employment Committee (Flanders)
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (US)
TIF	Tax incremental financing (US)
TOWES	Test of Workplace Essential Skills (Canada)
UPL	Educational Planning (<i>Uddannelses Planlægning</i>) (Denmark)
VDAB	<i>Vlaamse Dienst voor Arbeidsbemiddeling en Beroepsopleiding</i> – Name of the Flemish Public Employment Service
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VESOC	Flemish Economic and Social Consultative Committee (Flanders)
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VEUD	Adult Vocational Education and Training (<i>Voksenerhvervsuddannelse</i>) (Denmark)
VEU-reform	Adult Education Reform (<i>Voksen- og Efteruddannelsesreform</i>) (Denmark)
VUC	General Adult Education Centre (<i>Voksenuddannelsescenter</i>) (Denmark)
VUS	Act on Educational Support for Adults (<i>Voksenuddannelsesstøtte</i>) (Denmark)
VVU	Further Adult Education (<i>Videregående VoksenUddannelse</i>) (Denmark)
WIA	Workforce Investment Act (US)
WLP	Workplace Learning Program
WRTP	Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership (US)



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