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Companies and Vocational Training Centers Hand-in-Hand

Suggestions for Training Centers regarding the establishment of Company Contacts

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1. Company Contacts – The Be-All and End-All of Successful Vocational Training and Further Education

Promising vocational training and further education requires *active participation* by companies and their staff. As a matter of fact, the companies are the addressees of the training programmes as well as the ones taking over the people trained. In the field of vocational education research the necessity of an alignment in accordance with the companies and the utilization of companies as learning places for traineeships etc. has been underlined for years.¹

In order to use the job and the employment situation for vocational training and further education in the best possible way and in order to win the companies for an active participation it is of paramount importance to know the *expectations of and the conditions in the companies* (at the workplace, work organization).

Furthermore there is a risk that educational facilities who are not familiar with the (regional) company needs for training and skills, *educate and train the people without regards to the market and its requirements*. Finally, this results in the fact that publicly financed vocational training and further education has its effects neither on the side of labour market policies nor on the side of education policies.

Taking this into account, how can company requirements be determined and how can companies be incorporated in the process of training? From our experience regarding to the first approach of companies within the framework of tele.soft is to provide practical answers and suggestions for action.

Tele.soft is a project by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research for the development of innovative approaches to the training and employment of problematic groups within the labour market for IT jobs. INBAS GmbH was entrusted with its implementation. Since March 2002, the project has been running in the locations of Bonn, Hamburg, Munich and Osterholz-Scharmbeck in cooperation with local providers of education. The project is characterised by three steps:

¹ The following is to provide some examples of relevant titles published in Germany in the last few years:
Dehnborstel, P./Holz, H./Nowak, H. (Hrsg.): Lernen für die Zukunft durch verstärktes Lernen am Arbeitsplatz.- Bielefeld 1992.
Grünwald, U./Schmidt, J. (Hrsg.): Innovative Ansätze beim Lernen durch Arbeit und bei beruflichen Prüfungen. Bielefeld 2000.
Krings, U.: Flexible Wege zum Berufsabschluss.- Bielefeld 2001
Berufliche Fortbildungszentren der Bayerischen Wirtschaft gGmbH (Hrsg.): Zukunft der betrieblichen Bildung.- Bielefeld 2001

Demand Analysis

First of all, company contacts are established and surveys are conducted in the companies regarding the qualitative and quantitative need for expert workers. Based on the results of the demand analysis specific job profiles will be developed with the help of the **DACUM** ("Develop a Curriculum") **method** together with practitioners in the job.

Training

In cooperation with local providers of vocational training training modules or elements are developed from these job profiles which are aligned with the individual skills of the unemployed in regard to their future job.

Employment

The objective is to present the trained participants within a reasonably short period of time to the companies. The aim is to fill vacancies in the IT sector in correspondence with the results of the demand analysis.

This project which is explicitly aiming at the determination of and the orientation towards the needs of companies on the first labour market was the basis for the following summary of experience and for the suggestions for vocational training providers. They are based on the experience in different locations and are thus based on completely different regional structures. Furthermore, they are almost exclusively referring to the contacting of companies in the IT and ITC sector.

2. Steps Towards a Successful First Approach to a Company

2.1 How Do I Reach the Right Companies?

Before the first approach to a company one needs to determine the company address and/or further contact data, above all the relevant contact person. In general, it is primarily a matter of analysing and evaluating already existing contact data and examining its possible use for the concrete demand, e.g. the determination of the needs for further education in the IT sector.

In most cases, however, you will want to contact additional companies. There are two options to get hold of further contact data: Either you gather the data yourself or you purchase the data from a supplier. Depending on your resources concerning time, staff capacities or finances you will choose one or the other option or a combination of both. The following table will provide an overview of the main advantages and disadvantages of these **proceedings**. However, this list is not intended to be complete.

Utilization of Classified Telephone Directories

Description

Determination of addresses and telephone numbers of companies having advertised in these directories

+ Advantage

Address data and telephone numbers are relatively up-to-date

- Disadvantage

No contact person; no complete overview of the companies in this sector; no data on the range of activities of the company

Example

Yellow Pages

Utilization of Trade Registers

Description

Information about contact and company data

+ Advantage

More comprehensive information about the companies, mainly including a contact person

- Disadvantage

Very often not up-to-date; often no complete overview of all the companies in this sector; usually, trade registers have to be purchased.

Example

Hamburg Multimedia-Handbook

Internet Research

Description

Search via keywords/subject on the Internet

+ Advantage

Quick

- Disadvantage

Results depend on search request and quality of the search engine (too much, too little, wrong information, etc.); often the results have to be processed for further usage; topicality of information often questionable

Example

www.google.de

Utilization of Job Advertisements

Description

Gathering of contact data from the job advertisements in the daily press, in internet career guides, etc. for the relevant industrial sector

+ Advantage

Current data, generally including relevant contact

- Disadvantage

Staff and time-consuming as a longer period has to be observed in order to gain a good overview of the companies in the relevant sector; gathering of data requires a lot of staff; no data covering the range of activities of the companies

Example

Utilization of want ads in the relevant newspaper

Purchase of the Contact Data From the Chambers

Description

Purchase of the contact data according to selected criteria

+ Advantage

Relatively cost-effective compared to other suppliers; selection of data in accordance with certain criteria possible; format to be supplied can be chosen, thus, further processing often very effective

- Disadvantage

Address data and telephone numbers often not up-to-date

Example

Data base of the IHK [*Chamber of Industry and Commerce*]

Purchase of the Contact Data From Professional Suppliers

Description

Purchase of the contact data according to selected criteria

+ Advantage

Selection of data in accordance with certain criteria possible; in most cases the supplied format can be chosen, thus, further processing often very effective; in most cases relatively current data

- Disadvantage

Comparatively expensive

Example

Gabler Wirtschaftsdienst

2.2 Written Correspondence

E-Mail

Letters via e-mail without prior contacting are only partly accepted by the companies. In many cases, due to the presettings of the addressees' systems they are directly deleted or marked as possible Spam Mail and returned to sender or destroyed. A message mailed by post is more likely to be noticed and is not deleted as quickly as an e-mail.

If an e-mail is to be the form of dispatch to be used, here some general advice²:

- Due to reasons of security as well as of loading time it is recommended to send the covering letter via e-mail
 - as text format only (i.e. no HTML-formatted mail)
 - without file attachments
 - without one's own company logo
 - including complete sender address
 - without scanned signature, etc.
- Another reason not to use HTML mails and file attachments is the fact that such mails are often rejected or not delivered by the servers of the companies.
- Very important: Make sure that you do not send out or distribute a virus with your e-mail!

Printed Matter

For mass mailings it is recommendable to use mail classifications with a special postal rate.³ If the name of the direct contact person in the company is known (and if the number of cases is reasonably small or if costs are of minor importance) regular postage should be preferred.

Please use your regular company letter head for this letter because the first impression counts! Personalize the form of address as much as possible (e.g. "Dear Mrs Mustermann" is much better than "Dear Sir or Madam").

² Some useful general rules for Germany can be found at the E-Commerce Consulting Centre of the IHK Hannover: http://www.begin.de/deutsch/know/step/richtig_mailen.htm

Additional information (although with ads) also to be found under: www.mailhilfe.de

³ In Germany for example "Info-Brief" and "Infopost"

2.3 Telephone Contacts

Today, contacting via telephone is in most cases the best choice. In our opinion it should always be carried out by trained staff or professionals particularly when it comes to the „cold canvassing“⁴ of companies if expenditure is to be in relation to the result.

Ideally, the telephone contacters should have at their disposal

- solid experience as regards to the professional leading of a discussion
- a lot of endurance
- the ability to put a discussion in a nutshell
- polite persistence as well as
- sufficient frustration tolerance as the willingness to get into contact often needs to be aroused first.

For the first approach to a company the telephone contacters need

- defined goals and objectives,
- brief and comprehensive background information about the reason for the call,
- precise information in advance about the potential partner in the discussion,
- tips regarding the type of discussion to be expected,
- a discussion guideline,
- a good “peg” to keep the conversation going or a “keyword” to arouse interest.

In the case of tele.soft the following has proven itself:

Good Preparation of the First Approach to a Company

For the preparation and the first approach to a company already existing written surveys (and other information gathered) need to be evaluated and discussed with the relevant project partners and telephone contacters for harmonized action. Furthermore, in our experience it is very helpful to have a clear concept for the project and defined goals and objectives for each location which have been discussed and agreed upon with all project partners. This information should also be available to the company contacters and it should outline their targets and scope for action. This concept can have / should have variables which should be marked as such and the outline of which (target group, measure, etc.) should be agreed upon.

⁴ “Cold canvassing” in this context means: The acquisition of a company for the matters of interest of the provider of education without having had contact to this company before or without prior information available to the company.

Variables are those elements that must be applied by the telephone contacters individually and depending on the course of the each conversation. In the case of tele.soft these were for example the possible content of the training or the duration of the training, etc.

Transparent Wishes and Expectations

The possibilities of adaptation of the project to the interests and needs of the companies should be clear to the telephone contacters. These options should also be presented to the companies in a frank and open manner. Experience has shown that high expectations raised (for example concerning the cost absorption of the training or a planned date of recruitment) often lead to great disappointment when these expectations are not met. Credibility suffers from that and as a consequence the company contact is “destroyed” for good. In this case, it is therefore better to deal with the companies in a frank and open manner.

Realistic Time Frame

The time frame must be clearly defined and realistic at the same time. For example time periods of more than half a year in between company contacts are unrealistic.

Clearly Fixed Dates

During the first contacts via telephone one should right away fix a date for a visit to the company.

Clear Contact Documentation

Any contacting of a company – successful or not – must be documented in written form in order to facilitate a contact management as efficient and effective as possible. In doing so, e.g. duplicated calls can be avoided.

2.4 Target Time and Time Frame for Company Contacts

In our experience, a tight time frame constitutes an important element for further success in working with a company. The periods between the contacts should be reasonably short but not too short (approx. 2-3 months).

The companies should only be contacted if there is a reason for it and not just for nothing. Furthermore, when for example approaching a company for the first time it is important that the subsequent steps to be taken are clear and agreed upon amongst those in charge of the project. Otherwise, the companies who might have an interest will be put off by unnecessary waiting periods or consultations. If the next steps are not yet defined or if there is a lack of coordination

regarding the procedure, it is better to postpone the first approach to a company until everything has been agreed upon.

In the case of training programmes in close cooperation with the companies as in the case of tele.soft a tight time frame also means that the period between the first approach to a company and the realisation of a training programme or the recruitment of an employee for the company must be reasonably short. Thus, the implementation or promotion of a training measure should take place within a period coinciding with the needs of the company. If a company announces urgent need for personnel or training it will hardly be helpful for the company to be offered e.g. the financial support of the training by the Labour Office not starting until six months later.

2.5 Company Visits

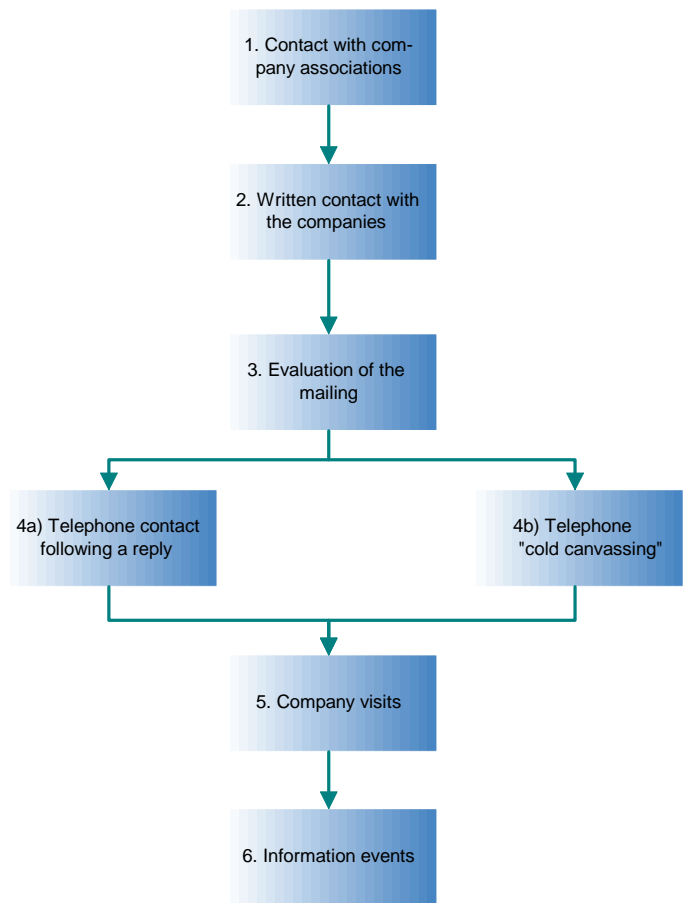
As a matter of course company visits should take place only after having made an appointment or having an invitation. Decisive and often underestimated is the fact that the appearance and manner of the visitor must be in accordance with the addressee. For this, it is not only important to be familiar with the company surroundings and general customs but also to have a certain degree of sensitivity and the ability to empathize. To give you an example: Respectable clothing such as suit and tie could be a "must" for a successful company visit to a bank or an insurance company. However, such a dress could also hinder or block a success when visiting a university-related start-up business.

What counts apart from that is: politeness and commitment! Commitment is particularly indispensable when it comes to assurances and promises.

Before interviewing/visiting the companies the concept or questionnaire should be available to those interviewed. When visiting one should leave documents concerning one's own business or project with the company as these documents might serve as a "reminder".

Steps of a First Approach to a Company (Example of the tele.soft Project)

1. Establish contact with groups of companies (Chamber of commerce, guild, industrial association, etc.) and build up a good understanding of the project. Establishing contacts with individual companies via a specific contact person makes it a lot easier.
2. Written approach, e.g. in form of a mailing activity via "Infobrief".
3. Evaluation of the written approach (mailing activity)
- 4a. Contacting the replies via telephone including the arrangement of a date for a visit or
- 4b. Telephone "cold canvassing" of companies not having replied
5. Personal visits to the companies
6. Information event for companies with a personal invitation



3. Contact Management – Remaining in Contact with the Companies

Continuous informing of the contact person in the company constitutes the core of optimal human relations. An e-mail might not always be the right medium to do so as it gets lost in the general flood of information much easier than a letter. The number as well as the type of contacts with companies have to be accurately coordinated and a record is to be kept of this as well as of the results or agreements (e.g. with the help of contact management programmes⁵). Too much contacting, particularly when it does not provide the companies with any new information results in disapproval. The companies are looking for help for their problems – they do not want to solve the problems of the caller or visitor.

Project-related information events, workshops, meetings, etc. are also a good means to remain in contact with the companies. In addition, they also offer the companies again and again the

⁵ Reading the following two articles gives you a good overview:
 Jungbluth, V: Wem die Stunde schlägt ...Termin- und Kontaktmanager im Vergleich.- In: c't 19/99, Seite 138
 Wiegand, D./ Christe, J: Ordnungshüter. 13 Programme für Terminplanung und Adressmanagement.- In: c't 21/02, Seite 172

opportunity to exchange new ideas or to arrange follow-up meetings. Nevertheless, the same is true here: Such events should have a project-related cause or should provide additional or new input. The benefit from such an event – not only or exclusively in a material sense – should be obvious for the participating companies.

Within the framework of the project tele.soft we are in the process of planning an information workshop for approx. 30-50 companies. To us, this seems to be a manageable size to be implemented under relatively cost-effective conditions and still facilitating a high density of contacts among the participants. We will invite all companies that have actually shown an interest. This is not necessarily limited to companies who have been contacted already but might also include newly established contacts via industrial associations, etc. The order of events on the programme of such an information event or of such a workshop could be as follows:

- First of all, the companies are provided with information about the project and the progress of the project in the region.
- This is followed by a discussion with the companies about their experience and their expectations.
- Afterwards, given an informal setting, those in charge of the project are given the opportunity to mix socially and to publicize their offer within this framework.

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Additional work of reference on marketing to be found under: <http://www.mi-loseblatt.de/>

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