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Entry Skills of Apprenticeship Applicants

Selected Findings of an ibw-öibf Study¹ based on a Survey of more than 300 Training Enterprises

From the perspective of the questioned enterprises, the most important entry skills of apprenticeship applicants overall are their personal interest in the occupation to be learned as well as punctuality and reliability. It is precisely their personal interest in the occupation which they will receive training in that is, at the same time, experienced as one of the major deficits of apprenticeship seekers. Training enterprises are particularly dissatisfied with their school performance (mainly with their knowledge of mathematics). By contrast, there is a relatively high satisfaction with the young people's IT skills as well as with some soft skills such as the - very important aspects - "punctuality and reliability".

As the selection of young people who are merely at the beginning of their vocational and in the middle of their personal development poses different challenges on enterprises than staff recruitment among adults, they attach high importance during the application procedure to criteria such as support provided by parents (including their accompanying their children to the job interview) and a handwritten curriculum vitae.

The present study, which was commissioned by the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS), comprises a quantitative section (viz.: a survey of 305 Austrian training companies) and a qualitative section (i.e. expert interviews with representatives from companies, part-time vocational schools and provider organisations of JASG - Jugendausbildungssicherungsgesetz or Youth Training Guarantee Act - programmes) and reveals the following findings: The **most important entry skills of apprenticeship applicants** overall are their **personal interest in the occupation to be learned** as well as **punctuality and reliability** (see figure 1). Both of these criteria are considered very important by 90% of the questioned companies and rather important by 10%. Also particularly relevant are the areas: "**willingness to learn and perform, work motivation**" (very important for 85%), "**accuracy, care**" (very important for 80%) and "**good manners (politeness, friendliness, etc.)**" (very important for 73%).

It is mainly because these key skills play such a vital role that companies frequently find fault with apprenticeship applicants. In comparison to the dimensions "importance"

and "satisfaction", the **largest deficits²** among apprenticeship applicants from the perspective of the questioned companies are seen in the fields "**ability to work independently**", "**accuracy, care**", "**personal interest in the occupation to be learned**" and "**logical thinking/understanding of workflows**".

It can safely be assumed that all four of these abilities/skills are hard to teach in the traditional education system; they underline how useful and important an **occupational preparation on the basis of as reality-oriented as possible work contexts** is or would be - particularly for disadvantaged youth and within the framework of measures of the Public Employment Service Austria (AMS). In particular, the applicants' personal interest in the occupation to be learned requires **close interaction between career guidance and preparation for working life** because even concrete interest can most probably only be judged (maybe also created or questioned) by relevant testing in practice.

Apart from the relevance of particular entry skills, also **satisfaction** with existing entry skills - as mentioned above - formed a key object of the study. Although **school performance** by no means represents the major criterion for the selection of apprentices by companies, their **dissatisfaction** with specific performance areas is **particularly pronounced**. Only 4% of the questioned enterprises, for example, are very satisfied with the apprenticeship applicants' knowledge of mathematics while 18% are very dissatisfied, and another 39% rather dissatisfied. Behind this dissatisfaction is probably also the fact - which is described in chapters 1 and 2 of the present study and which is truly gratifying from the viewpoint of education policy - that over the last years or decades an increasing number of young people with below-average school performance have opted to take up an apprenticeship training and the share of youth who do not take up any further training or education programme after completion of compulsory schooling is trending towards zero.

By contrast, there is a **relatively high satisfaction** with the **IT skills** of young people as well as with some soft skills such as the - so important aspects - "**punctuality and reliability**". In particular, the current apprenticeship post seekers' IT knowledge and their high **self-confidence** are praised in the oral interviews as special strengths of "today's" youth. These skills can largely be used for the company's day-to-day business. Self-confidence itself is frequently seen in connection with special **communicative skills**.

Regarding the selection of apprenticeship applicants it must be pointed out that companies **place importance on different aspects and prerequisites when considering young people than when selecting adult staff** (see figure 2). This is not least connected with the fact that young people have shorter career paths relevant for applications and undergo a development stage that is hard to predict at a young age. Therefore, when apprentices apply for a post, now as before relatively high importance is attached to being **accompanied by their parents** (rating: 67% very or rather positive, 15% neutral, 18% rather or very negative) and **delivery of hand-written CVs** (rating: 62% very or rather positive, 31% neutral, 7% rather or very negative).

By way of summary it can be said that **85%** of companies at least occasionally make use of some form of **entrance tests** (written or practical tests, assessment centres, or analyses of potential), which in 79% of cases are conducted by the companies themselves. **Merely 6%** of the questioned companies **are supported by external**

institutions in these entrance procedures, with only 2% of them commissioning exclusively external institutions for the tests. The extent of external support can therefore undoubtedly be termed (still) as very low. At the same time, however, a large number of enterprises do express the wish for stepping up the pre-selection of applicants - mainly on the part of the AMS.

Within the additionally conducted qualitative survey³, the questioned experts see the **timing of applications** also as fundamental for a successful entry into apprenticeship training. The earlier an application is made, the higher they rate the applicant's chances for an apprenticeship post. This is because, on the one hand, starting dates of entrance procedures are set earlier than before - in large enterprises they are frequently held at the beginning of the final year of school - and, on the other, because early applications are associated with a high level of commitment by apprenticeship applicants.

As regards the **assessment of JASG programmes**, the results of the survey among training enterprises are ambivalent but nevertheless **largely positive**. Those training enterprises, in particular, that have already had experience of apprenticeship applicants/apprentices from JASG programmes rate the attendance of such a programme as mostly positive.

The entirety of findings of the present study suggests a variety of **recommendations**, which mainly concern the following topics: expansion and intensification of career guidance and counselling; provisions for dropouts from apprenticeship training; support during the selection process in the training enterprises; and parent-related activities.

¹ Cf. Dornmayr, Helmut/Wieser, Regine/Henkel, Susanna (2007): Einstiegsqualifikationen von Lehrstellensuchenden, Vienna. The entire final report on this study is available for download in German on the AMS research network (www.ams-forschungsnetzwerk.at).

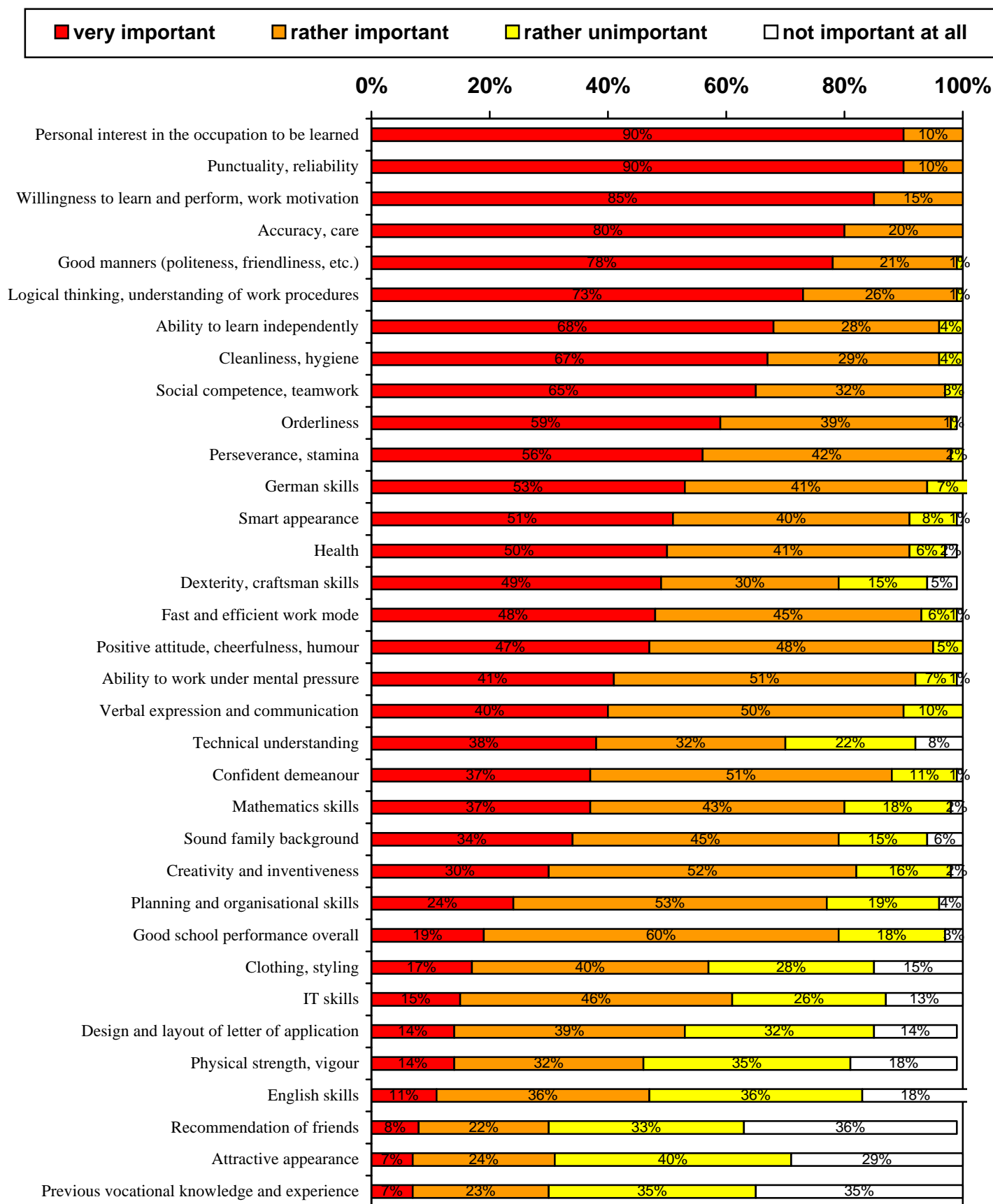
² Defined as the difference between importance of and satisfaction with particular entry skills of apprenticeship applicants.

³ Cf. Wieser, Regine/Henkel, Susanna (2007): Qualitative Erhebung – ExpertInnenbefragung, in: Dornmayr, Helmut/Wieser, Regine/Henkel, Susanna (2007): Einstiegsqualifikationen von Lehrstellensuchenden, Vienna.

The entire study can also be downloaded from the ibw website:

<http://www.ams-forschungsnetzwerk.at/downloadpub/redirect.asp?doc=Endbericht-Einstiegsqualifikationen.pdf>

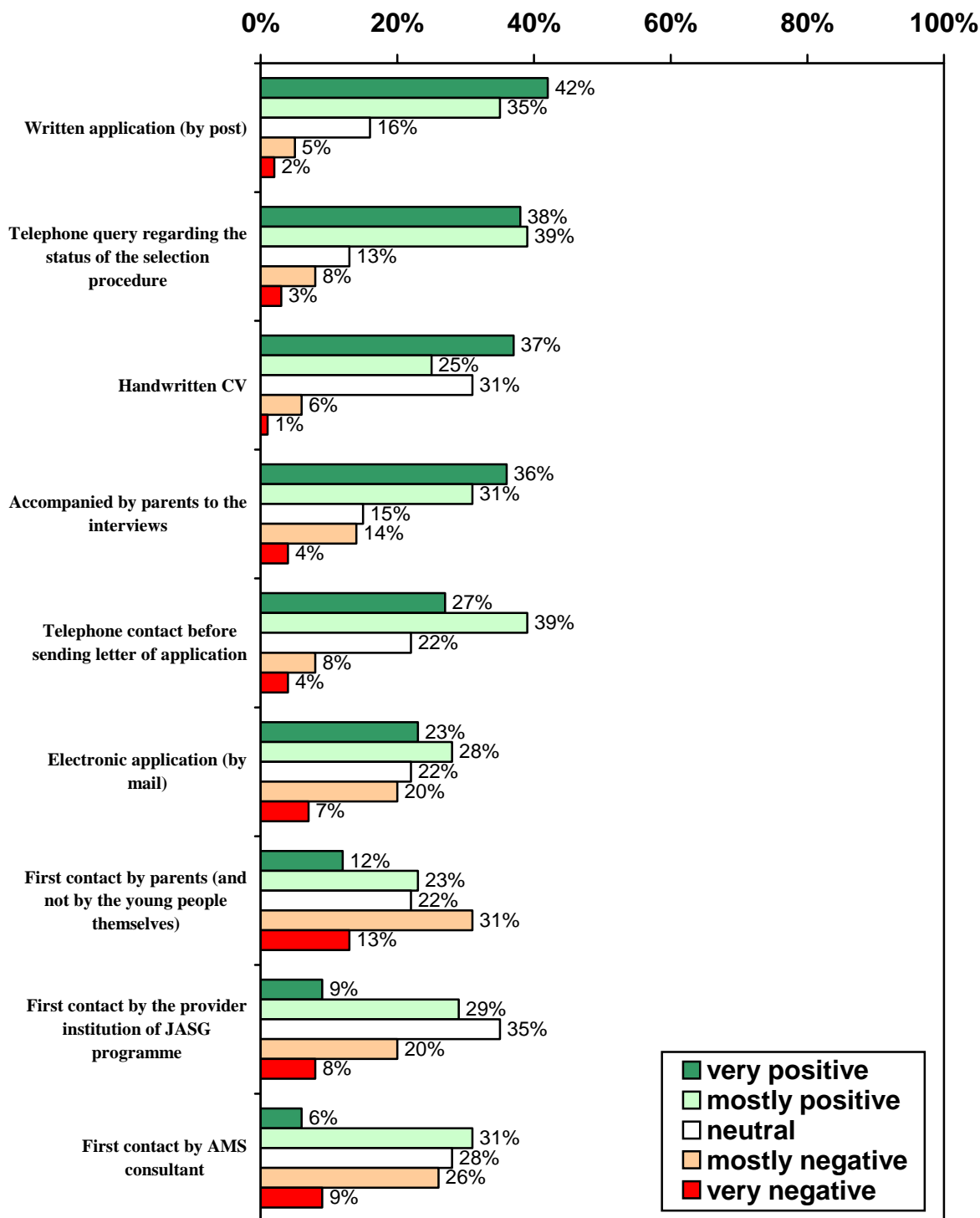
Figure 1: Importance of qualifications (apprenticeship applicants)



Source: Findings of the ibw survey among training enterprises (of n=305 companies)

Note: Previous vocational knowledge and experience such as attendance of a shadowing apprenticeship, JASG short programme, etc.

Figure 2: Assessment of application strategies



Source: ibw survey among training enterprises (of n=305 companies)

Notes: Use of a 5-step scale of answers comprising: "very positive", "mostly positive", "mostly negative", "very negative" and "neutral"
 Ranking by frequency of "very positive" answers