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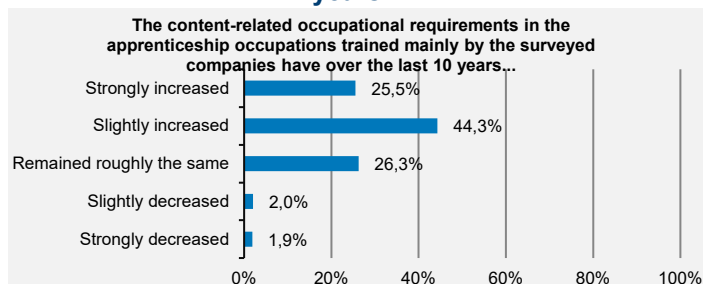
Apprenticeships: Increasing requirements and decreasing entry prerequisites?

The current ibw study *Anforderungen in Lehrberufen (Requirements in apprenticeship occupations)*, commissioned by the Lower Austrian Economic Chamber (WK NÖ), examines the question of how the occupational requirements in apprenticeship occupations have developed, which entry prerequisites are important for apprentices to meet and which exist, and which criteria play a relevant role in the job application process. The results of the survey of more than 500 apprenticeship companies in Lower Austria show very clearly that in many apprenticeship occupations the requirements are increasing or have increased, while the entry-level qualifications of young people are often unable to keep pace with this development. According to the training companies, they actually seem to be declining rather than growing. In many cases, the recruitment of suitable young people has become the central challenge of company apprenticeship training, even in apprenticeships that are very popular among young people.

56 % of the training companies from Lower Austria surveyed in May/June 2022 (n = 541) would train more apprentices if they could find a sufficient number of young people meeting the necessary entry prerequisites to do so. At the same time, the majority (70 %) of the training companies from Lower Austria surveyed in May/June 2022 are of the opinion that the content-related occupational requirements have increased strongly or slightly over the past 10 years in the apprenticeship occupations mainly trained by the companies (cf. Diagram 1); this contrasts with a very small percentage (4 %) of training companies that state that occupational requirements have decreased slightly or strongly over the past ten years.

DIAGRAM 1:

Assessment of the development of the content-related occupational requirements in apprenticeships in which training has been provided in the last 10 years



Source: ibw survey of training companies in Lower Austria in 2022 (n = 541 companies; conducted in: May/June 2022)

Occupations in which occupational requirements are rated as having increased particularly strongly include

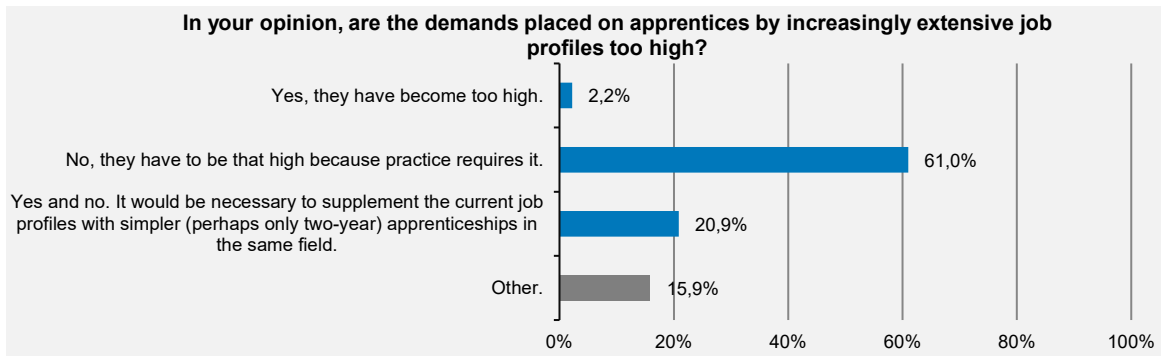
installation and building technology, vehicle body construction and motor vehicle engineering, electronics, mechatronics and information technology. The main reasons for the increased occupational requirements are generally considered to be the use of new technologies, methods and processes, advancing digitalisation, as well as increased customer expectations and the expansion of the range of tasks/activities (e.g. electro-mobility).

According to the vast majority of respondents, the demands placed on apprentices by more extensive job profiles have nevertheless not become too high, because these high demands are required in practice (cf. Diagram 2). Only 2 % of the companies state that the demands placed on apprentices have become too high due to the more extensive job profiles. Around one fifth (21 %) of respondents are at least ambivalent about the question of whether the demands on apprentices have become too high as a result of more extensive job profiles. In their view, it would be necessary to supplement the current job profiles with simpler (perhaps only two-year) apprenticeships in the same field. However, the survey results for Austria do not indicate a general need or general potential for additional simpler occupational profiles (such as in Switzerland¹¹), but they do indicate a need in individual occupations, especially in the areas of the hotel, restaurant and catering industry, IT/electronics and office/administration.

¹¹ In Switzerland, all apprenticeships offer the possibility of obtaining a three- to four-year Federal VET Diploma (EFZ) or a two-year Federal VET Certificate (EBA).

DIAGRAM 2:

Demands placed on apprentices by increasingly extensive job profiles



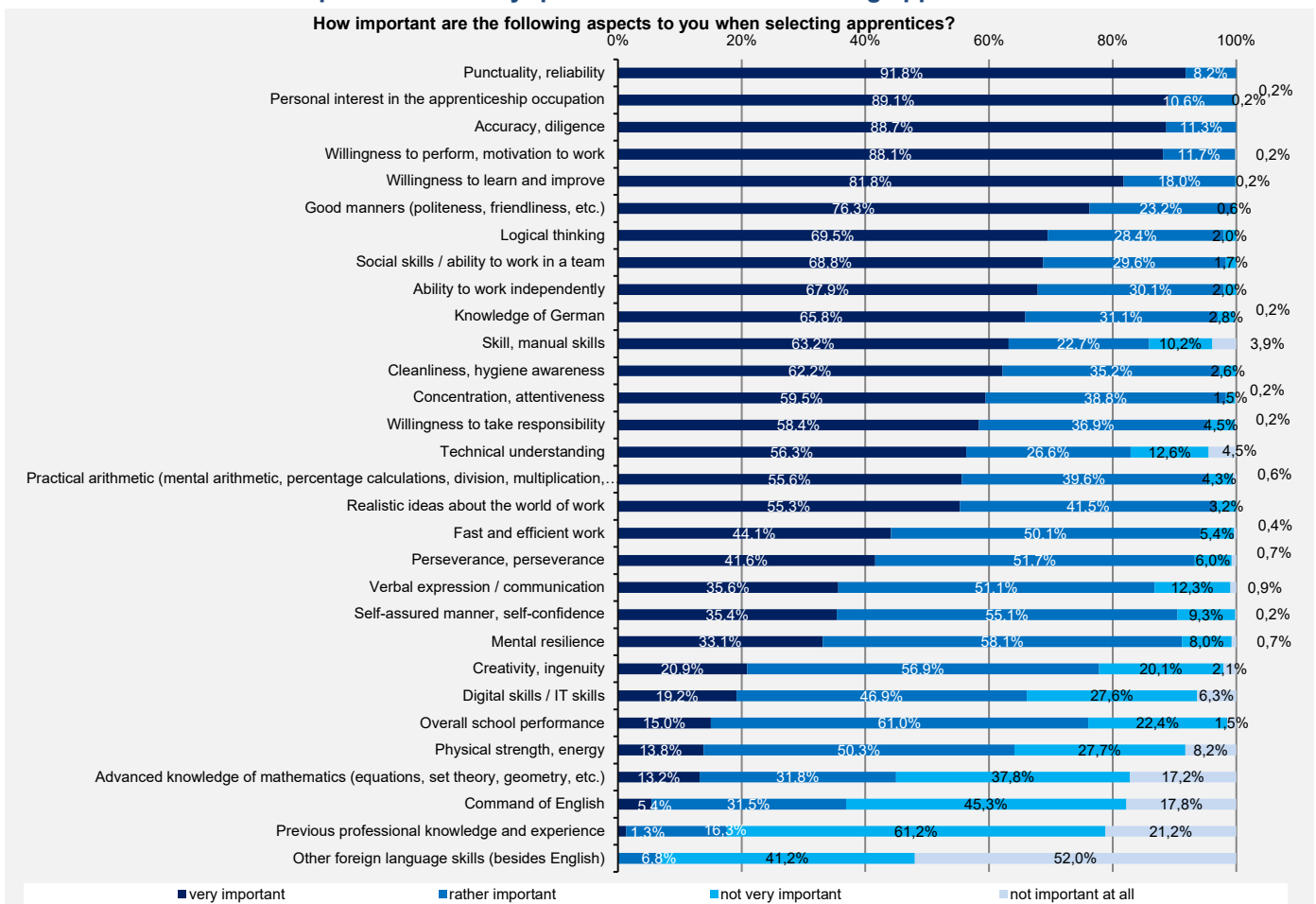
Source: ibw survey of training companies in Lower Austria in 2022 (n = 541 companies; conducted in: May/June 2022)

Given the increased demands, what about the entry prerequisites of apprentices/young people? As the four most important entry qualifications when selecting apprentices (cf. Diagram 3), the surveyed training companies named the punctuality and reliability of their apprentices (92 % very important), personal interest in the apprenticeship occupation (89 %), accuracy and diligence (89 %) and willingness to perform and motivation to work (88 %). The level of satisfaction that the company's own apprentices

meet these prerequisites cannot entirely correspond with their importance, the two variables cannot be measured on the same scale either. As many as 45 % of the training companies are very satisfied with the punctuality and reliability of their apprentices (another 40 % rather satisfied), 38 % are very satisfied with the personal interest in the apprenticeship occupation, only 28 % are very satisfied with the willingness to perform and motivation to work, and 26 % with their accuracy and diligence.

DIAGRAM 3:

Importance of entry qualifications when selecting apprentices



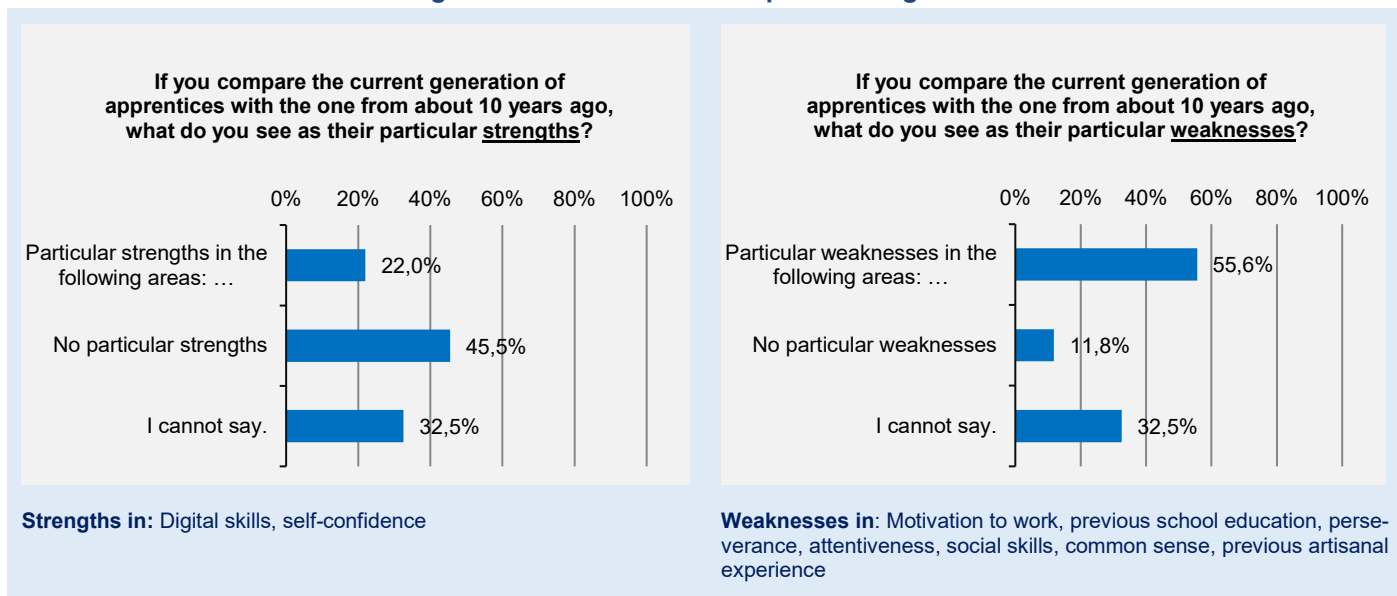
Source: ibw survey of training companies in Lower Austria in 2022 (n = 541 companies; conducted in: May/June 2022)

The share of training companies that recognise particular weaknesses in the current generation of apprentices (compared to the generation 10 years ago) (56 %) is significantly higher than the share of those that can (also) recognise particular strengths (22 %) - cf. Diagram 4. While the strengths are seen primarily in the area of digital skills and self-confidence, the weaknesses articulated lie particularly in the area of the motivation to work. A connection with the experiences and effects of the Covid-19 pandemic seems obvious at first glance, but is questionable because satisfaction with the motivation to work and willingness to perform was also relatively low in previous studies². In general, the question of whether, to what extent, and in what ways the entry qualifications of apprentices and apprenticeship post seekers have actually become lower in a time comparison is extremely difficult to answer. In any case, there is no doubt that at least a large proportion of the (surveyed) training companies have the impression that the level of many entry qualifications has declined. Incidentally, the surveyed training companies see the distraction of young people by their mobile phones (for 68.7 % this is a very or rather big problem) as the biggest problem in compensating for existing inadequate entry prerequisites of apprentices in the training companies. Another important aspect of the current study is devoted to the job application process itself, and in particular to

successful application strategies of young people (cf. Diagram 5). This is because, despite an acute shortage of apprentices (especially in small companies), there are still companies (especially large companies) that have selection options and procedures on a larger scale. For all training companies, the identification and selection of young people suitable for the respective apprenticeship occupation and company naturally represents a key task within the framework of apprenticeship training³, which, as can be expected, is handled in a very company- and person-specific manner. A particularly large number of companies rated telephone contacts positively, both before writing the letter of application (69 % positive) and in the form of enquiries about the status of the selection process (66 % positive). Obviously, this is interpreted as an indication of a manifest interest in the training and in the company. A personal, direct visit to the company without any prior contact is also viewed positively by the majority (60%) (presumably in the sense of special commitment). The same probably applies to the involvement of parents, whose presence at the job interview is much more frequently rated positively (46%) than negatively (16%). It should also be emphasised that in the majority of training companies it is now possible and sensible to apply for a post throughout the year.

DIAGRAM 4:

Strengths/weaknesses in a comparison of generations



Source: ibw survey of training companies in Lower Austria in 2022 (n = 541 companies; conducted in: May/June 2022)

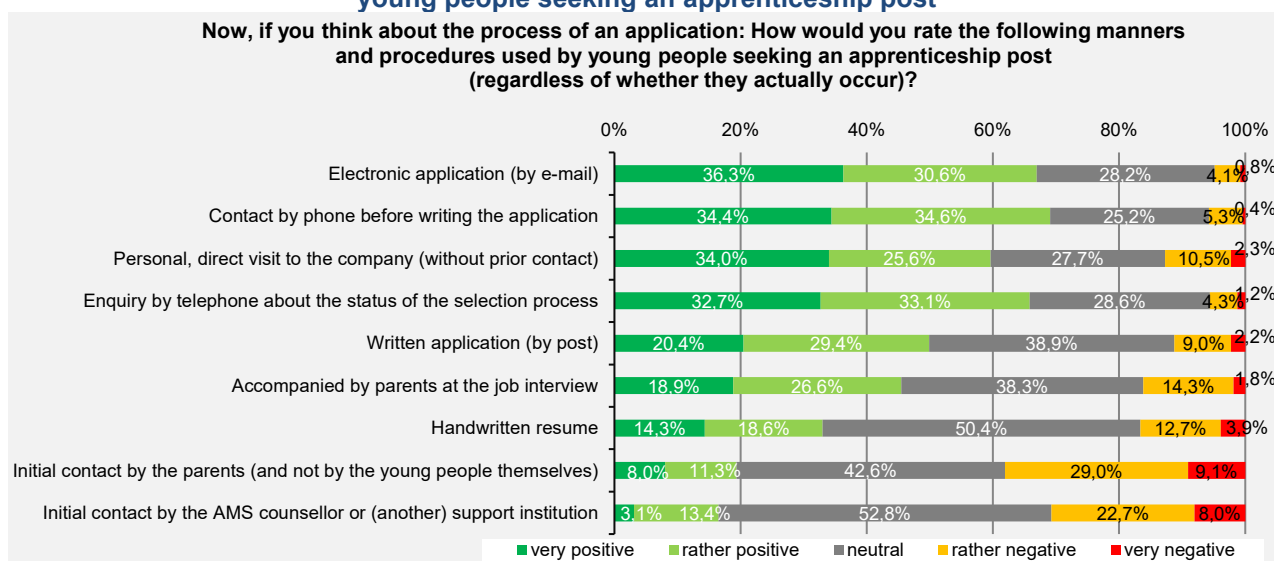
² Cf. Dornmayr, Helmut; Wieser, Regine; Henkel, Susanna (2007): Einstiegsqualifikationen von Lehrstellensuchenden (Entry Qualifications of Apprenticeship Post Seekers), ibw-öibf Research Report, Vienna.

³³ Cf. also Dornmayr, Helmut / Lengauer, Birgit / Rechberger, Marlis (2019): Betriebliche AusbilderInnen in Österreich. Erfahrungen,

Herausforderungen, Wünsche (IVET Trainers at Companies in Austria. Experiences, Challenges, Wishes), ibw Research Report No. 196, Vienna.

DIAGRAM 5:

Company evaluation of manners / procedures in the application of young people seeking an apprenticeship post



Source: ibw survey of training companies in Lower Austria in 2022 (n = 541 companies; conducted in: May/June 2022)

The current ibw study concludes with **possible options for action by education policy makers** with regard to increased occupational requirements and, from the perspective of the training companies, even decreasing entry prerequisites, which concern the increase of entry qualifications, the extension/intensification of training or also the addition of simpler occupational profiles in certain occupations.

A) Enhanced entry qualifications

- **Improvement of compulsory education:** e.g. through practice orientation, promotion of strengths, binding education goals (instead of a mandatory period of compulsory schooling), development/promotion of the potential of multilingualism, qualification within the framework of afternoon care, etc.
- **New (and more intensive) forms of job trial and career orientation** (such as the schemes Jobs out of the Box and Werkboxen in Styria) in order to be able to identify and promote suitable individuals even better and more frequently.
- **Apprenticeship-specific preparatory courses** (e.g. also in the form of attractive summer camps).

B) Making apprenticeship training more attractive and attracting new target groups with higher entry qualifications and/or previously unrecognised/unpromoted talent to apprenticeships: e.g. young people with a migration background (previously underrepresented in apprenticeships), apprenticeship training for adults, apprenticeship training for holders of the higher education entrance qualifications and dropouts from higher education (e.g. in the form of the

Dual Academy), etc. Initiatives and activities of various kinds have already been launched in this area in recent years.

- **Extension/intensification of the training**
- **Greater demand- and needs-oriented individualisation of apprenticeship training/the duration of apprenticeships (including extension options):** This would be a possible response to the increasing heterogeneity of target groups or entry prerequisites in apprenticeship training. An indication of a need in this regard is a steady increase in the number of apprentices with individually agreed extensions of their apprenticeship period pursuant to Section 8b (1) of the Vocational Training Act or BAG.
- **Enabling true part-time apprenticeships** (where, unlike the current model, vocational school instruction is also part-time).
- **Expansion and promotion of supporting didactic tools** (videos, games, etc.)

C) Complementary simpler job profiles in certain professions (e.g. hotels/restaurants/catering, IT/electronics, office/administration)

The entire study can be downloaded in German free of charge from www.ibw.at.

Source: Dornmayr, Helmut / Lengauer, Birgit (2022): Anforderungen in Lehrberufen – Lehrbetriebsbefragung (Requirements in apprenticeship occupations – a survey of training companies), ibw Research Report no. 211, Vienna.