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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 - Jugendausbildungsicherungsgesetz 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 survey\(^2\), 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.

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


Figure 1: Importance of qualifications (apprenticeship applicants)

- Personal interest in the occupation to be learned: 50% very important, 40% rather important, 10% not important at all
- Punctuality, reliability: 10% very important, 30% rather important, 20% not important at all
- Willingness to learn and perform, work motivation: 15% very important, 20% rather important, 20% not important at all
- Accuracy, care: 70% very important, 10% rather important, 10% not important at all
- Good manners (politeness, friendliness, etc.): 70% very important, 20% rather important, 10% not important at all
- Logical thinking, understanding of work procedures: 75% very important, 20% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Ability to learn independently: 80% very important, 15% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Cleanliness, hygiene: 60% very important, 20% rather important, 10% not important at all
- Social competence, teamwork: 50% very important, 20% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Orderliness: 70% very important, 10% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Perseverance, stamina: 50% very important, 20% rather important, 10% not important at all
- German skills: 55% very important, 15% rather important, 3% not important at all
- Smart appearance: 40% very important, 30% rather important, 20% not important at all
- Health: 70% very important, 15% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Dexterity, craftsman skills: 50% very important, 30% rather important, 20% not important at all
- Fast and efficient work mode: 70% very important, 10% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Positive attitude, cheerfulness, humour: 60% very important, 10% rather important, 3% not important at all
- Ability to work under mental pressure: 45% very important, 20% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Verbal expression and communication: 50% very important, 25% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Technical understanding: 50% very important, 40% rather important, 10% not important at all
- Confident demeanour: 50% very important, 20% rather important, 30% not important at all
- Mathematics skills: 50% very important, 25% rather important, 10% not important at all
- Sound family background: 41% very important, 30% rather important, 5% not important at all
- Creativity and inventiveness: 50% very important, 20% rather important, 10% not important at all
- Planning and organisational skills: 40% very important, 50% rather important, 10% not important at all
- Good school performance overall: 60% very important, 25% rather important, 15% not important at all
- Clothing, styling: 45% very important, 40% rather important, 15% not important at all
- IT skills: 40% very important, 40% rather important, 20% not important at all
- Design and layout of letter of application: 30% very important, 35% rather important, 35% not important at all
- Physical strength, vigour: 35% very important, 50% rather important, 15% not important at all
- English skills: 30% very important, 30% rather important, 40% not important at all
- Recommendation of friends: 36% very important, 30% rather important, 34% not important at all
- Attractive appearance: 40% very important, 40% rather important, 20% not important at all
- Previous vocational knowledge and experience: 35% very important, 35% rather important, 30% not important at all

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