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► Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people during the transition from school to training and work in Germany

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have also left their mark on the transition from school to vocational training and work. Students with fairly low levels of school qualifications are particularly affected. Moreover, the cancellation of vocational orientation offers due to the pandemic, e.g. internships in companies, may have an impact on the matching of young people and their enrolment in training in the next school year. This article attempts to provide both an overview of the most important effects of the coronavirus pandemic at this transition stage and the approaches used by professionals and educational and counselling institutions through digital media and virtual activities to counteract these effects.

1. Introduction

Throughout Germany, the number of training positions fell in 2020. According to the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB), a total of 527,400 in-company training positions were reported between October 2019 and September 2020. This corresponds to a decline of 50,700 positions compared to the same period the previous year. A particular year-on-year decline was recorded in the number of in-company training positions in the gastronomy and hotel business, in commercial professions, in the metal industry, electrical industry, and hairdressing trade. A decrease was also registered on the other side of the market in terms of demand for training positions (BIBB 2020).

The effects of the coronavirus crisis are particularly apparent for people with fairly low levels of school qualifications (MAIER 2020; FITZENBERGER 2020). According to a study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, they have the impression that the coronavirus crisis has reduced their chances of obtaining a training position (BARLOVIC et al. 2020). One third of the participants in this study were unable to put their career plans into action due to the coronavirus pandemic. One possible reason for this was the cancellation of job interviews (BARLOVIC et al. 2020).

Schools, inter-company educational establishments, educational institutions, advice centres, special funding institutions, and training companies were partly closed during the

pandemic-related lockdown. Young people and young adults were mostly unable to respond to offers as they usually would. The actors involved had to adapt quickly to the new situation and look for solutions. Below we examine approaches and activities in the fields of vocational orientation, career and training preparation, transition management, and training/training promotion in Germany.

2. Vocational orientation during the pandemic

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, alternative forms of vocational orientation are on the rise; many offers cannot take place in the usual form or can only take place to a limited extent. Among other things, this affects personal advice, training fairs, internships, orientation days, and access to vocational information centres. Numerous options are offered here to allow vocational orientation from a distance. For example, vocational information centres of the Federal Employment Agency point to their online offerings, such as the “Berufe Entdecker” (Discover Careers) website or the “planet-beruf.de” portal which provide extensive information on career choices and training, including the activities involved or daily routine. Vocational orientation from a distance is also made possible by television programmes such as “ich mach’s” (I’ll do it) on ARD Alpha.

Social media channels were also used in a meaningful way in vocational orientation, for example by the Youth Employment Agency Berlin, which broadcasts interviews with representatives of companies live on Instagram. Interested young people can send questions in advance, and these are then asked during the interview.

During the coronavirus pandemic, the application training focuses on telephone or video-based job interviews. Here too, attention is drawn to digital information and virtual tools, such as the “Bewerbung: Fit fürs Vorstellungsgespräch” (Application: Fit for the interview) app provided by the Federal Employment Agency.

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the format of Skype “speed dating” calls had proved effective for companies and future trainees. Young people can find out about various training opportunities, get directly in contact with the trainers, and apply for training positions. This service offered by chambers of industry and commerce was extended as a result of the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and carried out by numerous chambers. In August 2020, for example, the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Düsseldorf organised digital trainee “speed dating” in which 233 applicants and 33 companies took part. This gave rise to 173 matches in which the parties made an appointment to get to know each other better.

In addition, offers have been developed that allow personal advice face to face despite the need to comply with the protective measures. For example, the Cologne Employment Agency offers “walk-and-talk consultations”, where young people meet with a career adviser to obtain information and answers to their questions during a walk in the fresh air (COLOGNE EMPLOYMENT AGENCY 2020).

Internships, an important tool in vocational orientation, were often postponed or cancelled. This was due to health and safety measures, as well as a lack of personnel (for example, as a result of short-time work), with the result that companies cannot guarantee the supervision of interns. However, the situation varies from sector to sector. For example, it was possible to complete internships in some sectors, such as retail, but not in nursing (JUGENDSOZIALARBEIT News 2020). Since internships and career advice in school classes represent the vocational orientation offers most widely drawn on during school years, the cancellation of these measures may have an impact on matching young people and getting them into training the next year. In view of the difficulties in finding traineeships, the Employment Agency recommends getting involved in digital internships and orientation days. However, these formats still need to be developed.

One format that has already become established is the virtual fair. There are numerous offers here, including the I-zubi fair held by the Unternehmerverband Südhessen e.V. At this fair, numerous companies are represented virtually with their own stands where visitors can obtain information based on videos and flyers to download.

3. Career and training preparation

The coronavirus pandemic and the lockdown also had an impact on the structure of measures to prepare for careers and training. Young people were often supervised virtually because they had no access to the educational institution, their learning group, or their potential training companies.

Due to the lack of opportunities for face-to-face teaching, for example, several educational institutions sent training materials and learning packages to participants by email or post. The participants were often supervised over the phone or using online tools. However, educational institutions take the view that this cannot replace direct (face-to-face) contact (JUGENDSOZIALARBEIT News 2020). As a result, participants were often visited on site to organise consultation sessions during a walk. It is important to maintain regular contact and a reliable relationship using every form possible. The learning and work platform www.ueberaus.de, which makes it possible to work together in virtual groups irrespective of time and location, is available for these measures throughout Germany.

4. Transition management

Youth employment agencies were partially closed during the lockdown. Those that remained open did not allow any direct, personal contact. Instead, contact was usually over the phone, via email, or on social media channels. In this situation, “virtual youth employment agencies” are becoming increasingly relevant, be it for cooperation across legal spheres or as means of contacting young people. Young people can describe their situation or ask questions with just a few clicks and receive an answer or assistance from the relevant contact person by phone

or email. The virtual youth employment agency for the Rhine-Hunsrück district even allows direct contact with coaches. This approach is also recommended by the Federal Employment Agency which encourages offering alternative coaching formats that do not require physical presence, such as online or telephone coaching. These were also the most frequently chosen variants as coaching mostly took place over the phone or via messenger services. E-mentoring can also be an alternative for maintaining contact between the mentor and mentee despite physical distance.

5. Promotion of education and training

The uncertainty of young people as a result of the coronavirus pandemic is reflected in the results of a survey conducted by the Bertelsmann Stiftung. It established that 61 percent of the school pupils surveyed believe that their chances of obtaining training have deteriorated. When it comes to a university programme, only 23 percent of those surveyed share this view (BARLOVIC et al. 2020, p. 6). This could have the result that young people with a suitable school leaving certificate are more likely to opt for studying or other career paths. In contrast, school pupils with fairly low educational qualifications will try to find a training position. In the event that these efforts are unsuccessful, almost half (46 percent) of these young people would “look for a job without doing training” (BARLOVIC et al. 2020, p. 20).

School leavers with lower school leaving qualifications are more likely to look for jobs in areas particularly affected by the pandemic, in hotels and restaurants, in the retail sector, or generally more in the area of fairly simple services. Both before and during the training, these young people particularly need support that is as individual as possible and tailored to their personal needs, as is offered in assisted training or assistance to accompany training. Through assisted training, they can obtain support in the form of individualised advice, supervision, and training courses. Especially during the coronavirus pandemic, assisted training can be an effective tool as it offers support not only to trainees but also to companies. According to a survey conducted as part of the JOBSTARTER programme, the majority of companies (60 percent) wish to continue providing training, but they want support. They are increasingly asking for tips on funding for training (30 percent) and information on the use of digital tools in training (19 percent) (KÖNIG/DRESEN 2020).

Although most of the trainees were able to continue their training in small and medium-sized enterprises, some suffered more from the consequences of the coronavirus crisis which led to remote work, short-time work, or leaves of absence (KÖNIG/DRESEN 2020). Moreover, there were cases where the trainees could not be employed at all training stations and where their exchange with the training staff was less intensive (BELLMANN et al. 2020). Nearly six out of ten training companies in the hotel and restaurant business stated they were unable to impart the training content as planned. Half of these businesses also reported that it was impossible to supervise the trainees to the usual extent (BELLMANN et al. 2020). In exceptional cases, the trainees were entrusted with tasks that did not belong to their training

occupations (AHGZ 2020). Distance learning supported by digital media is difficult in this sector of the economy.

In occupations that involve the presence of customers or take place in a specific learning environment, only small parts of the occupational profile can be covered by digital learning options (BERTELSMANN STIFTUNG 2020). Difficult training conditions – such as those associated with the coronavirus pandemic – may go so far as to cause withdrawals from vocational training contracts. Teachers can play a key role here because they can influence trainee satisfaction, learning motivation, or willingness to perform by “consciously establishing trusting teacher–pupil relationships” (SOEMERS 2020).

Alternative design formats may also become more important in this context. During the course of the coronavirus pandemic, some companies that were no longer able to provide parts of training have transferred these parts to other companies or to inter-company educational institutions (ALLIANCE FOR INITIAL AND FURTHER TRAINING 2020). Training associations can be a good solution in this context. Training in a network can contribute to better professional qualifications among young people due to the change of learning location, for example, by getting to know different types of work organisation and teamwork or through the specialisation and equipment of partners. In addition, contacts with several companies can give young people better chances of being taken on after training (BIBB 2003). Last but not least, training in a virtual network may provide another means of overcoming the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic, such as a lockdown. The “Ausbildung im virtuellen Verbund” (training in a virtual network) project funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) aimed to implement e-learning elements in network-based training.

6. Conclusion: digitisation, individualisation and flexibilisation

In all fields of action during the transition from school to training, numerous and varied offers have been developed to maintain activities even during the coronavirus pandemic. Virtual offers such as apps, podcasts, chats, virtual training fairs and internships, or social media channels were the instruments chosen for this, although they do not always replace direct contact (JUGENDSOZIALARBEIT NEWS 2020).

In this context, it is becoming increasingly important to design measures individually, allowing barrier-free access and taking into account linguistic and cultural diversity, and to make training more flexible. Especially for young people with fairly low school leaving qualifications who are particularly affected by the current situation, support tailored to their individual needs, as is offered in measures such as assisted education, may be relevant. The further development of extra-company training models and training associations can also contribute to strengthening and increased participation in regular training.

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