



Information for information's sake ?

If you don't know this is the information age. 24 hours a day information is sought, discovered, gathered, processed, used or misused, shared or hidden.

This issue of the Journal looks at the issue of the information needs principally of employers, but also of individuals. It also looks at how the vocational education and training system provides the signals to meet those information needs in the labour market.

Information has always been valuable. Arguably, the difference is that today the stakes for society at large are higher. The right, or wrong, information today can have repercussions across the globe - and, what is more, in an instant.

Access to information is greater than ever. Barriers to its exchange have broken down. Furthermore, the increased access to information creates the need for new skills. Firstly, 'demand competence', the ability to sift through the mass of information to find what we want to know. Secondly, 'receiver competence', the ability to handle the information that we receive, interpreting it into something understandable, relevant and useful.

Vocational education and training systems are part of the information business. Their role is to impart and share information, to help to transform and translate it into knowledge skills and competences of value to the enterprise and the individual. The qualifications system is about providing information in an easily understandable form about an individual's skills and competences

Firms need information to manage efficiently the skills and competences of their workforce. For individuals a lack of evidence of their abilities, for example a lack of qualifications can mean the difference between having a job or not.

Given the high stakes people, understandably, want more information. However,

the information available does not always tell us what we need to know. In this sense the demand for information is rising faster than its supply, arguably making us more ignorant and increasing the potential for making mistakes.

But has what people really *need* to know changed, or is it a case of demanding more information because it is available? Is there a difference between what we need to know and what we *want* to know? Do we simply want more information for information's sake?

Arguably, employers need, and have always needed, to know if someone is the best person for the job. There are always implied conditions to this, such as the reliability, potential, loyalty, and trustworthiness of the individual. In times past, particularly when labour was scarce, a brief interview, or a recommendation from a reliable source was often enough. For some jobs, particularly, skilled, clerical and managerial, qualifications were important, but their lack not necessarily a bar to employment.

But higher levels of educational attainment, changes in work organisation, demands for higher quality, globalisation, and technological advance have changed job content. Employers are more demanding and want to know more about potential employees. As Shackleton points out in his article, employers have changed their recruitment methods because they are seeking different types of skills and competences from those sought in the past. Now they want more information on personal characteristics, which are not easily assessed, to choose the right person for the job. Formal academic qualifications are a guide and essential for labour market entrants, but they are by no means sufficient

The article, by Eliasson and Vikersjö shows how one multinational, *Electrolux*, based in Sweden, has developed the use of its own internal labour market to provide career opportunities for its employ-



ees and for talent sourcing. By making job openings visible throughout the organisation and the definition of more distinct and varied career paths the firm aims to generate the skills and the information about its employees to optimise the internal allocation of competence. This is further evidence that employers are developing sophisticated systems to find the best person for the job.

The role of formal qualifications and certificates in informing employers about the competences and capacities of individuals is examined in this issue. Qualifications are important and better qualified people have better employment prospects. Eliasson and Vikersjö point out that despite the operation of an internal labour market in *Electrolux*, recruitment to their management programme is effectively limited to graduates, as people below that level are not believed to have the required potential. This use by employers of qualification *levels* as a filter in their recruitment practices is pointed to in the article by Mallet. His research provides evidence that that employers are responding to the increasing number of more highly qualified labour market entrants by raising their skill requirements, not necessarily because they need a better skilled workforce but because better qualified manpower is more generally available.

The relationship between qualifications and the skills required by employers is addressed in the article by Merle. He states that, certainly in France, employers are more pre-occupied with the level of qualification rather than the skills that it is supposed to represent, and that there is a growing disassociation between the process of learning and qualifications. He argues that reforms to qualifications should be directed to towards the validation of work experience, and making them obtainable through different routes.

This is echoed, to some extent, in the article by Muñoz. He argues that despite the considerable efforts made to develop a system to take account of their skill needs, Spanish employers have little confidence in the relationship between certificates and skills, and he points to evidence of the use of pre-selection in the initial training system through training placements for young people. Muñoz also

points to the introduction of certificates of proficiency which are designed to act in the continuing vocational training system as the counterpart of initial training qualifications. Interestingly, he points out that an undeclared aim of this reform was to provide several million workers with some evidence of skills.

Consequently, for those without qualifications employment prospects are poor. However, evidence suggests that employers do not regard qualifications as providing information on what people can do, but rather an indication as to what they are *capable* of doing.

Merle's article looks at the need for a closer link between work experience and qualifications. Some of his ideas are reflected in the methods to assess non-formal learning considered in Bjornavold's first article. He gives a number of reasons for the growing interest in validating and accrediting non-formal learning. He looks at the limitations of the different methodologies that currently exist, not least the type of "knowledge" that we wish to assess. In his second article, Bjornavold puts forward a strong case for institutional support for assessments of prior learning in order for them to be widely understood and accepted.

The developments in accreditation of non-formal learning can be seen in part as a response to the growing information demands of employers. Accreditation of non-formal learning can improve job prospects by enabling people to provide some evidence of their skills to employers. In addition, it can also help firms increasingly interested in the potential for more effective and efficient allocation of the competences of their workforce.

If the information demands of employers have increased so too have those of individuals. Schober in her article looks at the vital role of vocational guidance for individuals. Not only has high unemployment made it harder for young people to make the right decision for their careers, but the increasing possibility of having to change careers means that adults too need to be in a position to make informed decisions. Finally, Straka looks at the motivation behind individuals undertaking self-training.



In conclusion, it can be argued that employers essentially *want* more information, but to respond to more demanding and sophisticated questions, to tell them what they *need* to know. Competition is more intense, not just between goods and services but between people. We want to know more about intangible assets and qualities. We want to know more to be able to use more effectively and efficiently our resources. We want to know more about the career paths that will provide stable employment and a good salary.

It now appears incredibly naive that in the early post-war period that many saw manpower planning as providing sufficient information for our needs and had confidence in forecasts for the numbers of workers required for the next five to ten years. Time and experience has shown that this is no longer feasible in an unpredictable world. In this way more information has made the world more complex. The explosion of information has laid waste many of our previously held assumptions. We are more informed, but have also realised that there is much more to learn. We therefore are, or at least feel, relatively more ignorant. More information has made us more sceptical and more insecure. We require more evidence on more complex issues to be convinced. The pressures of competition have left little margin for error. We want to know more to reduce the risk.

However, it is not clear what translates information into intelligence, for example, labour market intelligence. The current vocational education and training information system with its reliance, possibly over reliance, on qualifications obtained through formal education and training courses and pathways is clearly not seen as sophisticated enough to meet the information needs of the labour market.

Bjornavold calls this the “information dilemma”, stating that despite of the growing importance of learning and knowledge, the quality of information available to those (individuals, enterprises, public bodies) making choices on the use of human capital is questionable.

However, the role of qualifications in meeting employers information needs remains extremely important. This is not least because the resources required, often non-financial, to develop and operating systems to generate and acquire information about the skills and competences of people can be very high.

The evidence is that employers are using qualifications as filters and indicators. Arguably, given the pace of changes in work organisation and technological change, despite the constant criticisms of employers that young people leaving the education and training system are unprepared for the world of work, the *capacities and potential* of an individual are more important for an employer to know, rather their current skills and competences. Perhaps vocational education and training curricular, qualifications and assessments of non-formal learning should increasingly look to test these qualities, as perhaps at the end of the day this is what employers want to know and of what people need to provide evidence.

The nature of the change in the demand for information is, therefore, not so much information for information's sake, but more information to make informed decisions in order to make fewer mistakes. But the more we know, the more we realise we do not know and the more insecure we become, to overcome this we seek more information. Thus the information demand spiral continues. Who knows where it will end?

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