From the Austrian Health and Safety License to the European OSH Passport

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Significance and acceptance of vocational and technical education in Austria

In our globalized communication society with its fast technological and economic changes education and training is of high economic value and the start-up capital for personal development. It is also one of the basics for lifelong learning and for the ability to face the challenges of the continuously changing labour market sucessfully.

High quality vocational and technical education and training (VTE) oriented towards practical and economic requirements is therefore of major importance. The better VTE, the higher is the chance of employment. The fact that today more than 80% of the Austrian youth want initial vocational training at secondary level schools shows its high acceptance among the population.

VTE has a long tradition in Austria, not only as far as training for apprentices is concerned, but also for full-time VTE schools. At the end of the 18th century the first vocational and technical college was introduced and since that time a constant upward development has taken place. Today a wide offer and a great variety of educational pathways is guaranteed.

The Austrian education programs for VTE generally contain the principles of integration of occupational health and safety (OHS). But in working life the legislation for prevention of industrial accidents and occupational diseases is linked to the Health and Safety Executive (in Austria: Labour Inspectorate) and to the organisation the author comes from, the Austrian Workers Compensation Board (Allgemeine Unfallversicherungsanstalt).

Talks about a new kind of economy were to be heard at the beginning of the new millennium, as if the old economy funded on productive work had served its purpose and therefore also the continuously grown relationship between workers and work safety. Yet this doesn’t seem to be the valid for the economic development in Austria and in Europe. Since productive work has not disappeared completely, employees’ safety is still an important factor, of course within the existing new conditions.

All the risks which happen at work have to be covered and compensated by a social system based on social laws. Not only health insurance and pension insurance but also occupational accident insurance must be covered. The transfer of liability from the company to the workers compensation board is one of the basic standards of our occupational insurance system and an important part of our society now and in the future.

The situation can be compared to other countries: the Labour Inspectorate is not responsible for the situation in schools, especially not for the education programs, and the Workers Compensation Board is responsible just for work situations, as it runs the occupational accident insurance. Therefore most of the experience in practical prevention existing at these involved organisations is presently not used for vocational and technical education.

Prevention in a Situation of Overturn

Prevention in Austria is presently undergoing a rapid change. Health and safety at work are the main objects, however to reach the target many different ways are being discussed. Yet the existing concept will not be substituted by another one, the overturn can be understood as an additional chance for sustainable development of the approved methods and measurements.

The cooperation of members of the European Union resulted in developing a minimum level of safety at work and set significant benchmarks. But it is not just the European guidelines that have caused a new orientation, looking at the future instead of looking back was always the rule to proceed in a sustainable way.

The main reason for the new situation was the understanding that production processes, tools and media have changed rapidly and no improvements could be further achieved by safety rules. In fact the new technologies did not lower the safety standards, but neither did they raise them. In the European Union harmonisation and standardisation are regulations to guarantee the quality and safety conditions of products at a high level.

This system was built up not just for safety at work but mainly as integrated part of the European market. Guidelines and standardisation in the field of machine safety are still considered as partly incomplete. According to this situation there are very few harmonized standards for OSH existing and none in the field of VTE.
Integration of occupational health and safety into vocational training for apprentices

The integration of OSH prevention training into VTE requires cooperation between educational institutions and organisations existing by occupational health and safety laws. In Austria we are lucky to have a decree that helps to improve that cooperation. The Austrian regulation about protection of children and young people at work is based on a European Guideline and it contains temporary restrictions for work at dangerous machines. The regulation lists specific dangerous machines that are not allowed to work at before 18 months time of apprenticeship. After a special theoretical and practical instruction on these machines the time restriction is reduced to 12 months. The instruction comprehends a minimum of 24 training hours and it has to be got through in vocational schools for apprentices. The instruction has to follow the so called “guidelines for OSH instruction” worked out and published by the authors organisation, the Austrian Workers Compensation Board.

At the beginning the involved partners were slightly restrictive and could not imagine that a regulation valid for the protection in OSH for apprentices at work could influence the education programs. There have always been two different authorities responsible for the administration of these fields. But the regulation just offers a possibility for adaptation of the education programs without any obligation to do so. There were hesitations on the responsibility of teachers after occupational accidents that blocked the realization of the entire program. Responsibility for the workplace situation is of course always at the employer, as well as for the school situation at the teacher and the school director.

The decree gave our OSH experts the chance to influence the education programs and to provide schools with new media for VTE according to the state of the art and tuned to the abilities and knowledge of apprentices. In addition to that school administration was forced by representatives of the chamber of commerce to adapt their education programs according to our guidelines for OSH instruction, because there is always a need for highly qualified apprentices that can be used for productive work. And last but not least this is an improvement from the point of OSH, because without that special training at schools the restrictions will end after 18 months and apprentices can handle dangerous machines legally while not being prepared properly for that.

We developed guidelines for OSH instruction for 74 registered occupations and the number is still growing. These guidelines are built upon the list of dangerous machines in the law and their specific use at work within these professions. Together with this list of specified machines the various activities for training at these machines are stated. The guidelines were tuned together with representatives of the social partners and introduced to vocational schools for apprentices during a series of seminars announced by the local education authorities. Every apprentice having got that instruction in VTE receives a certificate from the school to be submitted to the employer. Within one year almost every vocational school for apprentices sent teachers to these seminars, were every participant was supplied with a media package for theoretical instructions based on brochures and a CD-ROM called “The L-Program” with various presentations in PowerPoint format.

The “Austrian Health and Safety License” – a first step into the ENETOSH project

In our opinion VTE is not just education for the occupation, for specific profession-related qualification but also education by the occupation, by experience and standing the challenge of working life. Qualified personnel are needed with experience in information technologies, qualification in economy including knowledge about OSH. We already work well with ECDL, the European Computer Driving License and EBDL, the European Business Driving License.

First talks about implementing the Occupational Health and Safety License in Austria were quite positive, even knowing there are still different legal situations within the European Union. Nowadays the target for occupational schools is to provide additional competences that are linked to the practical working situation. To reach that the schools let their teachers participate in special training seminars to enable them learning and teaching these new qualifications.

In Austria we are offering a series of OSH seminars since 2004 for teachers in vocational schools and higher technical colleges. Duration will be 96 hours in total, 48 hours are announced by the Federal Institute for Pedagogic Education and 48 hours are to choose from our organisations standard seminar programs. The participants will be trained to be tutors and instructors for OSH and they get a certificate on that. The education program contains the following items: basic laws and technical standards, organisation of OSH in practice, workplace safety, ergonomics, chemical substances, evaluation of hazards and cost-benefit analysis. With this extra knowledge teachers will be able to include OSH facts in the teaching programs of their schools. Finally their students will get a certificate, the above mentioned Occupational Health and Safety Passport.

A special working group within ENETOSH has to define the main criteria for international acceptance of the teachers licence and the OHS Passport as a certificate for students. Permission of trainers or teachers, permission of schools or institutes, examination of students by institutes, supervision by external experts and costs of the education are just some of the questions to be discussed within the involved organisations in the future.
We hope that ENETOSH will play an important role in the further development of this task and will help to follow up the implementation of OSH in the various national education programs in and probably at neighbours of the EU.

The following table shows an overview on OSH training in occupational schools in Austria and the qualification of teachers to trainers for OSH.

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<th>Education based on EU-directives</th>
<th>Austrian law</th>
<th>Secondary vocational colleges</th>
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<td>Schools for apprentices</td>
<td>Technical professions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Trainer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>College</td>
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<td>Student</td>
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