

Vocational Training for Companies and Society: Present and Future

The Basque Country has based its growth on Industry and it is currently at a crossroads where it has to decide where it is going. Vocational Training is directly involved in making this decision.

This is a current situation which started 150 years ago when the first Industries were set up; they needed a workforce and people were employed from a very early age, adapting to the production means and methods. Their training is practically non-existent. These industries integrated with Society and its social situation, managing, in the end, to give each village an identity. So as we began to identify *Weavers* (Bergara), *Locksmiths* (Arrasate); *Armourers* (Eibar); *Coach makers* (Beasain),...their integration became clear.

Over the years, production means and methods became more complex and companies created Apprentice Schools. These gave training for the emerging industries in specific technologies and people living in the villages where these were based aspired to get their children into one of these schools. There was an intimate implication between Society and Company.

The years went by and the complexity of the company continued growing. At the same time, an industrial field grew involving many small companies emerging in the shadows of these larger ones. "Clone" companies also emerged run by ex-employees who decided to go independent and create similar companies (the best weavers out of all the weavers and the best armourers out of all the armourers) This led large companies to start "outsourcing" this training activity, technically, financially and academically supporting the creation of Professional Schools, specialised in their company field, in the different villages. The society in which they are emerging wanted the schools to be set up and required socialisation for these training possibilities. There were groups of people who were prepared to lead the way, many of them ex-students from the apprentice schools.

In many cases these people were the business class of a time which set up the whole industrial fabric of Basque Country SMEs, which are still the basis of the Basque economy today.

This was the start of one of the key points in the Basque Country's entire industrial development and the start of companies such as ours, Elay, who participated in this development and clearly benefited from this movement. We have been participating in it for all 42 years of our history.

It is a win-win situation for Society, Companies and Vocational Training Centres: everyone has something to gain as each of them develop.

If we take a look at Elay's experience with Vocational Training, this has been, it is and it will be one of the fundamental elements of Elay's future.

Elay, over its 42 years of history has evolved in parallel with this training. Elay is a leading company in the Fine Cut market, producing precision and safety parts for the automotive sector, exporting more than 70% of its products. Today's business is the result of hard work by the current collective and retired workers. The vast majority of them came from the Vocational Training Centre in Bergara. (> 70% Upper Cycle-FPII (2 years Vocational Training), 20% degree-diplomas)

This whole collective, has been, is and will be capable of evolving from the very basics up to the ISO, TS, CPK, OHSAS, EFQM, SPC, PDCA, 5S, 6SIGMA, Just in time, CRM, B2B... For them, collaboration between the Training Centre and the Company has been, is and should be as close as possible.

Over these years they have worked together on matters such as:

- Feedback on the real current situation and the future needs in order to define the most interesting branches for the centre to give training on.
- Providing support so that Vocational Training is valued. In Elay and its surroundings, during the years when there was no unemployment, companies took on students with one year of vocational training looking for “easy money.” This cause for concern led the Vocational Training Centres, companies, parents and society in general to join together and formulate the approach of not employing students with less than two years Vocational Training for the time being. This helped to encourage students to continue studying for at least another year. (incidentally, ELAY still maintains this requirement)
- Collaboration in purchasing machinery along with many other companies in the surrounding area to provide the best training equipment.
- Sending old machines to developing countries to promote Vocational Training (Venezuela).
- Every year students are taken on for work experience to complete their academic training.
- Every year opportunities are offered for summer work in the company (2-3 months) to 20-30 students in the final year of their studies to find out what work is really like.
- More recently, promoting a forum of companies in the surrounding area to exchange experience in different fields and make the most of synergies in matters such as training. Many micro-companies, who would otherwise find this difficult to organise alone, can make good use of this.
- Collaboration in implementing a training module providing minimum Industrial Health and Safety training so that the Bergara Vocational Training Centre can acquire with the necessary equipment and it can also be used to train personnel in the surrounding companies. This will provide many micro-companies with basic safety concepts.
- Collaborating with the careers guidance officers for secondary education students in meetings in the company.
- Student visits to the company to get to know it.
- Possibility of worker refresher courses,...
- Direct communication between the people exchanging experiences, perspectives, feelings, etc.
- Internationalisation: ex-students from the Bergara are becoming the fundamental basis for setting up our new plant in Mexico which requires them to have much more than purely technical knowledge.
- Etc....

The experience has been completely beneficial for everyone: School-Company-Society.

The current challenge is to continue along this path. Reality leads us to today's situation where we require not a workforce, but people who are capable of taking part in a continual training cycle throughout their working life which they can expect will last for more than 40 years. We are in the knowledge companies, where the knowledge is in the people and they must be capable of developing it.

The man-machine concept has already been condemned to history. Nowadays the market requires Lean Manufacturing, flexibility or the capability to adapt to different posts, technologies, etc. self-managed groups which have to involve planning, safety, environment, generating ratios, evaluating ratios, graphs, statistics, Pareto charts, Ishikawas, implanting PDCAs and whatever the future asks of us. The company's evolution is going to depend on the capacity of this whole collective to move forward, all at the same time.

For this purpose, Vocational Training has to adapt fast to Production Technologies and Management Systems and develop more SKILLS than specific knowledge in future workers. They have to be constantly

thinking – What can I improve? How? They should have tools to work on these questions and methodologies and be able to then move them forward, etc.

It can be the basis for entrepreneurialism, returning to past years when this level of training was the motor driving the current business fabric. We cannot imagine a society which is completely devoted to services; industry is absolutely necessary and for that reason so are the people who promote it, maintain it and develop it.

Therefore, the initial training of our future workers is going to be very important although continual training will be just as important or more so for workers from different companies for their training, adaptation, recycling or whatever we want to call it. Consequently, this is going to be fundamental to create even closer communication between the Vocational Training Centres and the Companies. We are also going to have to be very brave and learn to identify specific training for specific collectives which help to give the competitive advantage which the company requires for the future.

The other challenge, which is being met little by little, is to incorporate women into the world of Vocational Training, particularly industrial training. We must make an urgent leap as this is not an option but a requirement and an obligation.

Nor can we forget what the near future will bring us: providing training for immigrant workers who will maybe require special plans, even special qualifications, to incorporate them into the current situation of today's companies.

How can we define our PAST and PRESENT experience with Vocational Training Centres? COMPLETELY SUCCESSFUL.

And THE FUTURE? COMPLETELY OPTIMISTIC, but we have to work (Company, Society-Institutions and Vocational Training Centres) as we have done up to now (or better) on a constant information-knowledge exchange although it should run much more smoothly and quickly helping us to continue growing over the next 100 years.... at least! But the future is just around the corner and we have to get our skates on.

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