

EFFECTS ON LINK-UP STRATEGIES BETWEEN TVET INSTITUTES AND ORGANISATIONS

The ProMES methodology and self-training and assesment guides break away from the traditional paradigm of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) Institutions which consists of offering courses for the operational and supervisory personnel of organisations. That activity continues to be valid as a contribution to the occupational development of persons. What the methodologies here presented intend to do is to bridge the gap between school and work, in a way that goes beyond deriving curricula from productive practices and doing exercises in the courses.

The first question that TVET Institutes have to answer is whether they consider that their role is to train individuals or collective groups, or a combination of both. If TVET institutions think that their role is to train individuals, and that it is up to organisations to incorporate them into their occupational systems, they will not have much use for the methodologies described here.

On the contrary, if TVET bodies consider that their role is also to promote learning in collective groups (organisations), guiding them in the constant enhancement of productivity and working conditions, then ongoing and all-inclusive learning methodologies should be part of their operational strategies. This does not mean that they should take over management of the organisations' training activities. There is an area of shared responsibility in these methodologies but it must be made clear from the start that the organisations themselves, not the TVET Institutes, are responsible for the continuous learning process.

Regarding TVET institutions that take this view, what are the effects of application of ProMES and self-training/evaluation guides methodologies on their strategies for linking up with enterprises and organisations? On the basis of our experiences in Mexico and the Dominican Republic, we have identified the following:

a. Nature of link-up

The idea is that organisations should apply ongoing and all-inclusive training models aimed at the constant enhancement of productivity and working conditions. TVET institutions will provide the necessary support for developing the most appropriate proposal.

This implies that TVET bodies must develop a technical capacity for building such training models, undergoing an institutional learning process from theory and concept to practice. Like any other learning process, it requires a strategy for gauging progress through periodical training evaluations.

This view opens up a wide range of fields of action for TVET institutes, which involves a risk of losing and scattering impacts. It is essential therefore to demarcate the scope of activities. The management of human resources in the organisation concerned is a first demarcation, but even there the field is too wide. Focalisation might start by an instrument enabling workers to contribute – through continuous learning – to the constant improvement of productivity and working conditions.

b. Impact planning

The impact sought by TVET institutes will not be reflected in the number of cases, which will never be enough. The impact achieved will lie in the significance of the application. The learning to be disseminated in the corporate and trade union communities should be encoded on the basis of a trial run. Encoding serves to adapt the methodology to the national or regional context, and also permits to “package” it for others to use with adequate external counselling. It can also be an input for feedback into the design of curricula for the formal courses of TVET institutes.

Just as in the management of traditional courses, TVET bodies can train, evaluate and certify others in the use of the methodology. This is a more deliberate way of generating impacts than mere dissemination.

c. The role of organisations/enterprises

Organisations have traditionally played a passive role in linking up with TVET institutions, at best confining themselves to a diagnosis of their training

needs. They have concerned themselves with administrative details (time schedule of courses, costs, location, participants) but very little with actual contents. For that they have relied on TVET institutes.

In the case of ProMES and the guides, the organisations' management has to become involved in the project and integrate it into its strategy and everyday practice. To the extent that even the project leader should not belong to the human resources division but to the operations area, as learning takes place in there. This means that the operations division must be envisaged not just as executor of predetermined routines but also as generator of a continuous learning process. From a cultural point of view this is a radical change, for it implies accepting that there are many "loose ends" in management, and there are always opportunities for performing operations in a better way. It requires a different style of leadership, open to participation and experimentation by the personnel.

d. Application pathway

Application of the methodology is not a uniform process. Consistency with the main purpose should be kept, that is the ongoing, all-inclusive learning both of individuals and the organisation. The goal is not generating other identical applications. Each case is just an instance of how the purpose can be achieved, but is open to adaptation to the needs of other organisations. When they have few procedures and systems of work management and communication, organisations can take up the methodology with all its components. However, if they are well structured and have a culture in planning and systems, they generally pick those components that are a complement to what they already have and function adequately for them.

This means that TVET institutions must approach each case with an open mind, not imposing the methodology but presenting it as an example. This calls for a cultural change in the training institutions themselves, whose members do not always take an attitude of learning with others. They usually manage methodologies in an orthodox and rigid manner, in the belief that they are complying with their function. When there are subsidies, enterprises may accept commitments with training institutions simply because they are free of charge. The veritable acid test occurs when enterprises have to finance the application, external counselling included. TVET bodies then have to strive in that direction, persuading them to bear the costs.

e. The role of TVET institutes in training activities

The methodology does not foresee that training institutions should plan, organise, implement and evaluate training activities. Their role is to provide coaching in the principles of the methodology without following a rigid scheme. It is a mistake for them to stop at the diagnostic stage not suggesting solutions, or not to go along with the solutions proposed. Another mistake is to impose pre-established curricula or competency standards: the essence of this methodology is that each organisation should do its own homework, otherwise it will not succeed.

TVET institutions have to train internal coordinators and facilitators at enterprises, and external consultants not belonging to them (to the institutions). Training takes place through products or deliverables: profiles, manuals, knowledge and performance evaluation instruments, manuals of procedures, systems managing the process, training guides for internal facilitators and evaluators.

This faces training institutions with a consultant's profile completely different from that of persons who have traditionally delivered courses at enterprises. These new experts must have an updated view of business, markets and organisational development. They must also have sufficient analytical capacity to put together fragments of tacit and explicit knowledge into a consistent plan and turn it into a training guide. They must have a gift for communicating easily with high management and workers alike, keep an open mind to different viewpoints and at the same time be persevering enough to meet agreed goals. They should possess a power of synthesis, encouraging project participants to help with their talents and capacities in the process of application. Another key competency they require is to be systematic and orderly, without verging on insensitivity in moments of decision, which will always appear.

The above are some of the key competencies of TVET consultants responsible for promoting the methodology. Implementing it requires a cultural transformation inside training bodies, for which they need to adopt an individual and collective learning strategy. In the case of the Dominican Republic, at the Infotep North Regional Office, when the team of consultants managed to set off a systematic and focalised process of reflection and learning, results flourished quite naturally and goals were gradually met without conflict. The image the institution had among enterprises improved, and demand for consultant services on the methodology grew.

Revamping a vocational training institute in this direction is difficult and not devoid of troubles. Some TVET institutions in Latin America have managed to embark upon this course. However, when managers and directors are overly

concerned with political visibility, they are unlikely to feel inclined to lead a process of change of this kind.

f. Some requirements TVET institutions must fulfil for the ProMES methodology and self-training and assessment guides proposal to succeed

- a. Total support of the institutions' directors, placing the methodology at the centre of consultant services to enterprises and organisations.
- b. Mastery of the technology by core members of the institute, which guarantees internal consistency (a methodology manual can be a sample of this).
- c. Development of a uniform language among consultants, permitting to evaluate them clearly and objectively according to their proven capacity,
- d. Clear-cut format by blocks or modules, facilitating communication with enterprise managers, and visualising with them a systematic and understandable work proposal to tackle a complex subject like productivity and occupational competency.
- e. Correct promotional strategy for approaching employers and workers through promotion seminars and other means.
- f. Flexible application: the method has to be adapted to the needs of enterprises and the capacity of consultants.
- g. A view of integral training underpinning the methodology. This leads to relevant answers to problems or opportunities during application in different organisations.
- h. Good response capability in the TVET institution, and continuity in its relations with organisations through the services it offers.
- i. Ensuring immediate impacts in organisations.
- j. Using an exponential expansion strategy whenever the methodology is applied.
- k. Application in small, medium-sized and large enterprises. Lessons learned in large enterprises can be transferred to small and medium ones, and vice versa.
- l. Capability by the TVET institute for recording and managing certificates.

g. The role of organisations in training activities

Organisations are mainly responsible for the success of the proposal and must adapt it to their needs. As happens with other projects, the proposal is liable to suffer from resistance to change or from the impact of market ups and downs. As it has come to stay in the organisation, we must bear in mind that it has to go through a number of stages during application: start-up with a pilot experience, expansion and maturity, possible reversal due to relapse into meaningless routines as a reaction to an innovative process.

In the current context, there are two great threats in organisations hampering the introduction of a methodology of this kind. The first one is the accelerated volatility that virtual economies are infusing into management: from the very beginning of the process, under the influence of the latest novelty or theory, some anxious participants will be looking for an alternative project. The second threat is the constant change of upper and middle managers in organisations that have failed to find a solution to their changing surroundings and expect to do so by shuffling their personnel around.

Both threats must be taken into account for achieving dynamic planning and avoiding a process of constant modifications in managing the project. In the cases described here, the methodology – and ProMES in particular – have proved to be quite impervious to internal and external onslaughts. But there are limits, and organisations should be aware of what stage of application of the methodology they are at, and what their own metamorphosis has been.

Probably the most difficult thing for organisations to accept is that they themselves are responsible for the training, especially that of the operatives. This does not mean that all training activities are in the hands of internal personnel, but they are responsible for managing the continuous learning process. This is not to be left to others (through subcontracts or outsourcing) because it is the very heart of productivity management, the core of dynamic competitive advantage. Unfortunately, forced by the need to abate costs in the short term, many organisations yield to the temptation of cutting back on non-essentials, anything that is not required for immediate survival.

This also conceals deeper misgivings, like a fear of new styles of leadership, the need to acquire new competencies without knowing beforehand if they will be able to master them. Moreover, by adding confusion and constant changes of objectives, the motivation their personnel may have to get actively involved in the project vanishes altogether.

A *sine qua non* condition for the methodology to take hold is to build and maintain firm leadership in managing the project and outside pressures may sometimes contribute to this (eg. clients' requirements, compliance with ISO quality standards). We saw it at a sugar mill in Mexico, where the methodology helped to get workers involved in everyday management, or in the case of the wholesale garment trader in the Dominican Republic, that included the use of the methodology in its contractual conditions.

h. Costs management

Application of the methodology implies costs, which are not constant along time. During the initial stage costs are high because counselling is needed to adapt the model to the characteristics of the enterprise in question, and to train internal coordinators and facilitators. Costs go down as the organisation appropriates the methodology and the model becomes consolidated. In the case of the guides, initial costs are higher than for ProMES as their design and edition take time.

Another peak in costs occurs when the guides have to be reproduced and space has to be provided for persons to meet. This is even more critical when there are high rates of personnel turnover.

How can TVET institutions manage costs? Traditionally, they have utilised cost per hour of instruction plus support material and teaching aids. The system is no longer valid for application of this methodology. If emphasis lies on self-training with the assistance of facilitators, costs are concentrated at both ends of the process: a. in the drafting and reproduction of the guides, and b. in the process of evaluation/feedback by each participant.

Terms of reference for the link-up between the TVET institution and the organisation vary according to the parts of the methodology to be applied. The training institution and the organisation must jointly determine what products are to be considered. One organisation may want first to obtain a competencies' profile, another may wish to apply self-training/assessment guides immediately, a third one to start off with ProMES. As opposed to traditional training, where the cost of inputs was taken into account, in this methodology costs are related to results or deliverables (products).

Costs management is in no way obvious, for many deliverables depend on the degree of personnel involvement in the project pathway. It would be too demanding to work only on deliverables when not all aspects of the process are under control. We may consider a halfway alternative, like paying for a number

of hours of programmed consultant services, with the commitment of reaching certain levels of deliverables for each specified stage.

TVET institutes can play an important role in the reproduction of the guides, the cost of which will go down drastically with electronic resources. Training institutions can negotiate reproduction packages for several enterprises at a time, and get better prices from suppliers. All the same, it is an investment that enterprises are not accustomed to, which may sometimes cause disproportionate and irrational reactions by management. That is the moment when TVET institutions can submit arguments justifying the investment and suggest alternative solutions.

In brief, training institutions will have to modify their usual schemes of allocating resources and drawing up budgets that are no longer in consonance with the needs stemming from ongoing learning.

The above consequences are not an exhaustive list and there are no doubt many more. The ones we included were only sketchily dealt with, and their importance go beyond what we have managed to describe. However, this may help in the process of reorientation of TVET institutions, making them more proactive to the learning processes required to achieve productivity and sustainable employment quality.