

VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND LABOUR RELATIONS

Vocational training is not only related to education and technological development, it is part of the labour relations systems. This is clearly revealed by a number of facts: vocational training has started to appear in labour legislation of all countries; it is increasingly being included in collective bargaining and it has aroused a significant interest and participation from the main labour actors: the State (through the Ministries of Labour), enterprises and workers (through their representative organisations).

This is mainly due to two reasons:

First; vocational training is a labour issue in itself since it is the fundamental tool through which the necessary knowledge and skills for work are transferred. This has always been like this and therefore it becomes particularly important nowadays when knowledge often becomes the main production factor.

Second; because in spite of its specific importance, vocational training is related to all the issues that are part of the labour relations systems: employment, wages, productivity, quality, competitiveness, labour safety and health, working conditions and environment, social protection, and equal opportunities.

Training as a labour fact

Training has always been closely related to labour relations. Even in the pre-industrial stage, when production was mainly hand-made, there already existed the roles of the master craftsman and the apprentice in which the former gradually allowed and fostered a successive accumulation of knowledge and skills in the latter who, eventually, became a bearer of such knowledge and carried on with the trade's tradition. At that time, the learning process was absolutely integrated within those first labour relations and it was part of the "rules" of production and work of the time.

Alternatively, the development and boom of the industrial age went by together with the trends towards specialisation and higher levels of work division in society. Although learning has never stopped to take place as an important activity in working centres, at some point, the responsibility for training those

who would work in certain job posts began to lay on other institutions or organisations, both physically and institutionally, which became known as training centres.

Simultaneously to the first industrialising efforts, this last trend was observed in Latin America and the Caribbean by means of specialised instances in charge of the training function. In such stage, the apprentice is a person –generally a young person– who attends training courses in an institution for a certain period of his life and who eventually becomes a worker after being hired and placed in a job post where he may apply the previously acquired knowledge and skills. However, this was the most common situation though not the only possible one. In fact, in the mid seventies, some vocational training institutions, such as the National Training Institute (INA) from Costa Rica and Cinterfor/ILO itself, were already concerned about designing and implementing strategies that would allow the certification of workers who, through their own labour performance, had attained qualification levels that deserved a formal acknowledgement.

If we refer to the industrialisation stage that took place influenced by the import substitution development model, we could say that training played quite a disguised role within the labour relations systems of the time. Although qualifications were an essential component of production in any place and circumstance, during such stage, “labour relations” mainly referred to bargaining and/or conflict facts and processes regarding wages, stability and ways of promoting employment, extension of certain social benefits, etc.

In such context, training was an activity which was rarely the object of negotiation. It was practically never mentioned in collective bargaining and labour legislation only made a few references, mainly in statements or some explanations concerning the institutional environment in which it could be carried out (usually a national and public entity). In several countries, workers’ and employers’ organisations kept a high interest in it but, after all, it was limited to the participation of delegates in executive instances of vocational training institutions.

In fact, they constituted labour relations systems within a context in which:

- a. The State played a fundamental role in several aspects: collective bargaining, production and direct provision of services and in the protection of national production by means of trade barriers.
- b. Enterprises have particularly developed in a strongly protectionist context, focusing on the domestic consumer market, and therefore they did not have much pressure neither from consumers nor from competitors.
- c. Workers and their organisations struggled for more and stronger rights, taking into account a basic assumption that the State and entrepreneurs also considered: production and employment would increase steadily, in spite of possible cyclical crises. Besides, trade unions were organisations in the process of strengthening since it was believed that both industrial production

and wage-based contracts would grow indefinitely as well as their representation basis and their power.

- d. As a consequence of the “internal” development strategy itself, the need for innovation and development was restrained, product life cycles were quite long, and the demands for training and especially retraining of the labour force were not as strict in terms of updating with new techniques, tools, materials, or ways of organising work. The challenge was then quantitative: to provide enough qualified and semi-qualified staff for industries.

In the last twenty years, this reality has radically changed in practically all its aspects thus bringing about, among other consequences, a reassessment of training within labour systems and an increasing interest of actors in it. Why?

Firstly, because **the international insertion strategies of regional economies have changed**. In a more or less radical way, national production has begun to be exposed to other types of regulations, which require urgent measures to improve their competitiveness either by means of unilateral commercial opening policies or in the context of regional integration processes. This has intensified the technological change rhythm applied to production and reduced the life cycles of products and, therefore, of training; thus causing constant pressure to update it.

Secondly, **the relative importance of the “knowledge factor” within the new ways of organising production and work has increased substantially**. The control of information and knowledge then becomes strategic, in the same way as land or means of production were controlled in the past. The ability to build up knowledge and manage it under the concept of learning organisations is considered to be a fundamental strength to achieve competitiveness and has resulted in an appreciation of human gifts. Therefore, the interest showed by different actors to take part in the decision-making stage of the design, implementation and financing of training has become fundamental too.

Thirdly, **the assumption of a regular and indefinite growth of production and employment –or, better said, the direct relationship between them– has turned out to be no longer valid**. Although production may continue to increase –as it does, in fact–, employment is not generated at the same pace and, we often observe the occurrence of a new and worrying phenomenon of economic and productive growth together with an increase in unemployment. In many cases, the employment rise in those sectors that have greater economic dynamism is not enough to make up for the dismissals caused by the new capital-work relationship, affected by the introduction of technological innovations and the shutdowns in sectors that cannot counteract competition with foreign goods. In the old context, during crisis periods, it was enough to implement compensation-like policies such as unemployment insurance or emergency employment programmes. Nowadays, a new generation of active labour market policies has arisen and they always regard training as its main and strategic component.

In this new context, the positioning of productive and labour actors changes, bargaining becomes more complex and the approach of issues such as wages or labour stability in an independent way becomes more difficult. We now pay much more attention to the relationship among employment, wages, productivity, production, competitiveness, quality, etc. Training has been reassessed and is now beginning to be regarded as a strategic issue. It is included within an increasing number of collective agreements and it is also contained in labour law. Even in contexts of serious conflict, social dialogue and coordination experiences in the field of training are taking place and seem to multiply with a great development and sustainability capacity.

Ministries of Labour are beginning to take the lead in the vocational training scenario of Latin America and the Caribbean, mainly in the definition of policy guidelines. This is the result of both a phenomenon contained in a general process of restructuring and re-establishing the State's role in social and economic life and the already mentioned training appreciation in the field of labour relations.

From their old mediation role in the capital-work relationship, that focused on wages, stability and working conditions, these Ministries are now expanding their field of action by approaching the vocational training dimension from the point of view of active employment policies. This is expressed both in terms of the standards and the institutional structure itself, since they are creating and developing different offices and services, which take specially into account vocational training and its relationship with the other labour aspects.

The origin of this further responsibility that Ministries have taken up is the understanding that **vocational training is a crucial element to design and implement active employment policies.**

In the mid seventies in Chile, approximately ten years later in Mexico, and specially as from the beginning of the nineties in other countries: Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, to name a few, Ministries of Labour developed ambitious projects by which they became more involved in the field of creating public employment policies. These programmes, mostly financed by taxes administered by the Ministries, and sometimes reinforced by credits from the international banks, not only acknowledge the importance of vocational training in view of the results achieved, but they also begin a reformulation of their traditional institutional structure: the incipient training systems seek to be defined by paying more attention to the **training demand** coming from the productive sector. This approach seeks to overcome, in some way, the stiffness of some national institutions that were found to be sticking to a programme and organisational structure that appeared to be too dependent on the training offer available.

As a consequence, it could be said that training has a leading role in the active employment policies that begin to be promoted by labour Ministries. Within this orientation, the developed concept has a role that focuses on the design of policies and strategies, the creation of financing mechanisms, and the supervi-

sion, monitoring, and evaluation of training actions, thus assigning the task of executing such actions to other public or private agents.

As it has been already stated, the value given to these policies becomes evident as a large amount of financial resources is assigned for the execution of various programmes and projects. These funds may come from different sources: public funds for training established by the law; extraordinary resources from public funds; unemployment funds; together with Ministries of Labour's capacity to assume public indebtedness in the field of vocational training (projects with the IDB and the World Bank, among others). As a short review, we could mention the following examples:

Tripartite instances are also significant since, with the coordination of the Ministries, they integrate employers and workers into the discussion and decision-making about the policies that are dealt with.

But the important role Ministries of Labour have been playing in the already mentioned **active labour market policies** should specially be acknowledged. As long as such Offices can participate in the definition of the great national guidelines regarding development and productive change strategies, together with their participation in the field of strengthening and updating the training offer, they have the chance to act simultaneously and coherently upon the different and main sides of the problem.

The decision to intervene in the labour market by means of employment policies has a number of reasons: cater for transition problems in the process of economic opening; give an answer to social risk situations through redistribution instruments; correct market failures, whether regarding the link between labour supply and demand or the issue of training.

There is a field within the new concept of active labour market policies where the Ministries of Labour have taken, and take, highly important actions: programmes and projects oriented to youth training and employment. Being directed to youth in a situation of structural unemployment and social risk, they were created as mechanisms of mitigation of the social effects of policies of structural adjustment and opening to international trade with the economies of the region, with their corresponding processes of reorganisation of state social services. Through an intensive and concentrated process of training services, training by cross-cutting competencies of a psycho-social type, education levelling and work practice, the programmes seek to increase labour insertion opportunities of this sector of the population. Some of their main characteristics are: adopting the detection of opportunities of work practice at enterprises as an indicator of the relevance of training; self-focusing on the target population; and the decentralised and market-regulated execution.

To sum up, Ministries of Labour in the region are definitely taking action in the field of vocational training and they are contributing to its integration through higher and national strategies related to productive transformation and the chal-

lenges to increase productivity and competitiveness at enterprises and the economies, so as to guarantee an environmentally and socially sustainable economic growth.

Vocational training's connection with other labour issues

Training and employment

In an adverse context in terms of availability of employment, such as the one we live in, there often appear callings for solutions expected to be given by vocational training and general education.

In that sense, it could be definitely argued that the global solution to the problem of the lack of employment does not only require an answer from the field of vocational training. To be clearer: neither training nor education generates more employment by themselves.

However, this does not mean that both vocational training and education do not have a role to play in the struggle against unemployment; indeed there is no effective strategy in that sense that could ignore the training aspect in some way. But training needs to be aided by other policy measures, mainly economic ones: public investment, encouragement of private investment, simplification of the access to credit –consumer credit and productive investment credit– among others.

So, what is the role of vocational training with regards to employment?

- Firstly, although vocational training does not have a straight influence on the availability of global employment, it is a tool to promote equal opportunities to employment. If we analyse unemployment, we see that those who are poorly qualified, are far more affected by it.
- Secondly, workers' good training is the necessary platform from which initiatives can be taken in terms of technological innovation, adoption of modern schemes of production and labour management and, all in all, every effort to make enterprises more productive, competitive, and with more chances to survive and, therefore, to keep the available jobs and create new ones.
- Thirdly, in some cases there is a potential demand for work that does not manage to be catered for due to the lack of qualified staff. Although this kind of unemployment is usually a minority within the total amount, it should not be neglected.
- Finally, vocational training increases and improves the competencies needed by the worker in order to have better chances to keep their job or get a new one, as well as to have access to better paid jobs under proper working conditions.

Training and productivity

According to a broad definition, productivity is the relationship between the production obtained by a production system and the resources used to obtain it. Therefore, productivity is defined as the efficient use of resources –labour, capital, land, materials, energy, information– in the production of goods and services.

Productivity may as well be defined as the relationship between results and the time devoted to achieve them: the shorter the time spent in achieving the desired result, the more productive a system becomes.

Although productivity is sometimes related to work intensity, this means that most of the times there is an excess of effort or an “increase” in work, which usually leads to very limited rises in productivity. As it is usually said, the essence of productivity improvement is not working harder but more intelligently².

There is a straight and positive relationship between training and education, and productivity. This is confirmed by comparing countries and seeing that the best results, both in terms of productivity and economic growth, are found in those countries with better-trained individuals. Even technology –the other element that is considered to be crucial for increasing productivity– is not more than the consequence of education, culture, creativity, and management systems.

However, many countries have policies of structural adjustment and opening to global economy that promote a never-ending restructuring process in large enterprises, leading to staff cut downs and affecting millions of workers. Often the enterprise’s operation and achievements are diminished, resulting in new staff cut downs and undermining workers’ trust and mood, even reducing productivity.

On the other hand, small enterprises are playing an increasingly important role in nowadays productivity systems as part of the suppliers chain, local producers and distributors networks. Although large enterprises have a strong influence on job creation, small enterprises are in fact the generators of most job posts. Many of these job posts provide stable income and a new working environment, however, there is a high number of job posts which are non-satisfying, lowly productive, dangerous or lacking the most basic social protection.

Alternatively, different approaches advocate the idea that if quality employment is promoted, it may actually be profitable thanks to the progress of productivity. Investment is thus suggested in two key factors: vocational training and labour safety and health.

² Prokopenko, Joseph, *Productivity management: A practical handbook*, ILO, Geneva, 1989, p. 3-4.

Training and competitiveness

Nowadays, it is more often heard that vocational training is a fundamental component within the strategies to improve competitiveness. In its more literal sense, the term competitiveness refers to an enterprise's, sector's or country's ability to compete within the framework of economy.

Even though this concept has been valid throughout time, it gains greater importance in the present context of economic globalisation, where the opening processes enable enterprises, productive sectors and national economies to show their strengths and weaknesses more clearly.

Nevertheless, there are different approaches to sort out the most appropriate strategies and, specially, the combination of measures that may be more effective. On one hand, we find strategies examples which are mainly based on macro-economic measures tending to lower production costs, such as decisions in terms of exchange policies, tax exemption or labour costs reduction (wages, dismissals, etc.). On the other hand, there is the need to gear efforts towards a strategic horizon outlined by the achievement of what has been called "systemic competitiveness".

One of the main differences between the two competitiveness approaches lies in the differing time scope of their policies. The first approach is usually adopted with the aim of obtaining more or less immediate results, within circumstances that appear to be adverse. The classic and most current example is that of resorting to the devaluation of the national currency so as to bolster the foreign trade sector, whether as a unilateral measure or as a reaction to similar decisions taken in other countries. Such measures have an almost immediate effect and thus they are the most frequent strategies to increase competitiveness.

Conversely, the systemic competitiveness approach aims at long-term results. It does not depend on a limited and relatively simple block of measures, on the contrary, it is based on a complex policy range, which, once integrated, would lead to an overall more competitive position of the economy. Policies of investment in public and private infrastructure, of technological innovation and development, and of human resources (education and training), are some of the most typical instruments outlined by this approach.

It is particularly within this second approach that vocational training has a clearer and more central role. It is therefore understood that when investments are oriented to rise the qualifications level of the population, they become an action to promote the increase in competitiveness and, at the same time, they reinforce the effectiveness of other complementary policy lines. Even though vocational training is –in any context– a useful venture, it is within the framework of long-term strategic approaches where its contributions to benefit the society and the economy have a stronger chance to be expressed.

On the other hand, it is evident that as long as vocational training holds an outstanding position within long-term strategies, it faces the challenge of re-assessing itself in terms of strategies and in articulation with other fields of activity. It is in such sense that it is possible to confirm that two types of approaches affected by their corresponding types of reductionism have progressively become out of date in the region.

- Firstly, that concept of vocational training as a limited stage usually prior to the active life of a person. In Latin America and the Caribbean, in accordance with similar processes in other regions of the world, vocational training is rather regarded as an ongoing process, necessary throughout a person's life and no longer as a simple preparation for the insertion in a particular job post.
- Secondly, the idea of vocational training as a specialised field of activity and in a certain way as a self-referent, is becoming less popular, compared to the belief that vocational training is both an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional issue, so that it should integrate that framework of comprehensive attention strategies towards economy, productive sectors and chains, enterprises, and the community.

Therefore, vocational training has striven for two types of integration: one considered in a vertical sense, as it seeks to provide answers not only to different situations but also to the own transformation of such situations (continuing training); the other, in a cross-cutting sense, seeking to establish articulations with other fields of social and economic policy, with varied institutional environments and taking part in different disciplines.

In brief, the two main dimensions of a transformation process in vocational training that seeks to place it in a strategic and functional horizon in order to achieve systemic competitiveness.

Training and wages

Under-qualified workers are not only more affected by unemployment and the different forms of labour precariousness³ but also by lower wages when they are actually employed. This direct and clear correspondence can easily be confirmed in reality: qualified labour is better paid than non-qualified labour.

This is valid not only inside enterprises but also in the more general environment of the labour market:

- **At the enterprises**, because it is natural that the more a worker contributes to the institution's productivity and competitiveness the more he is paid,

³ According to the ILO, precarious employment is a "work relationship lacking employment security, one of the most important elements of the employment contract", and it "includes temporary contracts and fixed-term contracts, home work and subcontracting".

apart from the fact that in most modern enterprises, highly qualified workers are regarded as being part of the business' assets, and they need to be kept.

- **In the labour market**, because workers who have a higher level of qualification have broader margins and opportunities to move, and they look for the jobs which better suit their interests, particularly regarding the amount of income they receive.

The above already brings up a fundamental issue for trade unions: defending and promoting opportunities to increase the level of qualification of workers is one of the main ways to protect their labour stability and wages.

However, we all know that it is not enough to struggle for more training opportunities for workers, and hope that this would spontaneously, or by the mere will of employers, bring about an improvement in staff wages. This is another aspect of the correspondence between training and wages which is extremely important for the trade union's perspective: the possibility of negotiating wages by means of the tool (and the argument) of vocational training.

The main objective of every capitalist enterprise has always been to maximise benefits (or better said: profit making). Any other objective the enterprise may have or action it may take is oriented to and depends on that. Thus, producing more and with higher quality, reducing costs, and conquering markets are all objectives which only make sense for the business if they are geared to obtaining greater profits.

Following that line of thought, the enterprise will always want to favour the changes and actions that may result in an increase of its profits, whether directly or indirectly. And it is plainly obvious that it will resist and avoid anything that goes against that, i.e. anything that either directly or indirectly leads to a reduction in its profit rates or to lower down its growth pace.

This is one of the essential aspects of bargaining and the worker-employer conflict, in the sense that workers, within their possibilities, wish to have something similar: decent and higher (if possible) income, at the lowest cost available (saving their free time, working under hygienic and healthy conditions, with perspectives of professional and labour development, and keeping a stable employment).

Throughout history, the difficulties stemming from the conflicts of interests between one party and the other have been overcome by two mechanisms or situations:

- When the number of workers is scarce compared to the amount required by enterprises, their cost (wage) increases, since it becomes more expensive for enterprises to diminish their production pace than trying to keep wages low. With regards to this, the most frequently quoted example is that of Ford automobile factory during the 1920s: workers, exhausted by the non-stop

rhythm imposed by the assembly line, were massively quitting their jobs; however, the increase in productivity made it possible for Ford to multiply their wage per hour by four so as to encourage them to stay.

- When through the mechanism of strike trade unions have succeeded in breaking the employers' resistance to increase wages once they are faced with a prospective reduction of earned profits because of a decrease in their production pace or a complete stop.

Nevertheless, the above is becoming less frequent. On one hand, the high rates of unemployment always leave an available reserve of workers to which enterprises can resort without the need to increase wages or reduce their profits. On the other, the economic opening and the new rules of global competition, force trade unions to consider further factors (apart from the wages workers are bound to lose while struggling for benefits) when deciding whether to keep or call off a strike. When enterprises are more vulnerable, a long-lasting strike may mean a reduction of markets, and in extreme cases, it may cause the enterprise to disappear, resulting in a loss of employment.

But as long as vocational training –as it was stated above– contributes to enterprises' productivity and competitiveness, it may be regarded as an indirect, but effective, factor for business profit increase. Consequently, it should be possible to discuss and negotiate the way in which the obtained benefits are distributed between the enterprise and the workers, specially taking into account the contributions made by trained workers to the achievement of the objectives set by the enterprise.

In that sense, some enterprises in the region have been designing “variable remuneration” models, by which wage increases depend on increases in productivity. Therefore, it is possible to encourage enterprises to set about modernisation processes which, bearing in mind different strategies –among them the continuing training of their workers–, are oriented to increase their productivity levels. This is complemented by specific agreements establishing that wages will rise in proportion to positive results obtained.

Training and health at work

To “know how” to do one's own work in due time and properly, with quality and creative capacity, is no doubt one of the crucial goals of vocational training. This not only implies that workers efficiently combine their knowledge with real production or service rendering situations, but also that they may do so under non-hazardous conditions, without threatening their life or health.

It is essential to build up a culture of prevention, education and training that takes into account the issue of health and safety in all aspects. This is why it becomes absolutely necessary to incorporate everything related to prevention into vocational training.

The traditional look on these aspects places the emphasis on the need to incorporate prevention rules and measures into training, in the different stages of the work process. This means to detach the different phases of labour, study the risks and dangers that appear in each of them and integrate gradually the appropriate preventive measures into them. This way of dealing with the issue adjusts to the Taylorist criterion of division of tasks.

However, we have witnessed to what extent there have been changes in the contents and the ways of working, where the borders between job posts are blurred and workers must face changing situations with a higher degree of initiative. This forces us to regard this issue with a new look, but not leaving aside the traditionally used prevention techniques, which might actually still be useful.

Part of this new approach regarding training and safety and health consists of the need to foster self-care in future and present workers by embarking in what some have called “training in values”. In that sense, principles such as those referred to the defence of one’s own indemnity, non-discrimination, solidarity, acquisition of a healthy lifestyle, intelligent consume, preservation of ecosystems, self-respect and respect to others, may be incorporated as cross-cutting contents of all training actions.

Although the above reinforces the importance of considering vocational training as an essential tool for the systems of safety and health management at work, and, therefore, it should be part of the cross-cutting contents of training programmes, it must not lead to the conclusion that once the worker has assimilated this kind of knowledge and promoted such values he is the only one responsible for his safety and integrity.

The fact that the worker assumes a more active role in his health care and his physical and psychological integrity does not relieve the enterprise from all responsibilities. Once more, the schemes that add the specialised technical component (qualified professionals in the prevention of labour risks) to the workers’ and employers’ participation in safety and health management at work seem to be the most appropriate ones.

In this sense, *Safework*, the International Labour Office’s InFocus Programme on Safety and Health at Work and the Environment, states the following: *the investigation of the origin and underlying causes of work-related injuries, ill-health, diseases and incidents should identify any failures in the OSH management system and should be documented.*⁴ (...) *Such investigations should be carried out by competent persons, with the appropriate participation of workers and their representatives.*⁵

⁴ InFocus Programme on Safety and Health at Work and the Environment (*Safework*), International Labour Office, Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems, Geneva, May 2001, p. 18, item 3.12.1.

⁵ Idem p. 18, item 3.12.2.

Finally, some countries have a labour legislation that establishes the obligation to constitute bipartite committees of labour safety and health, while in other cases some enterprises have chosen that alternative without there being any legal provision in that respect. Having such space for participation in the management of labour safety and health is an opportunity for trade unions to have a say in the management of such important dimension, in which training –according to the already exposed reasons– will have an outstanding role to play.

Training and equal opportunities

Apart from being an instrument that contributes to productive labour, quality and competitiveness in enterprises, vocational training helps to promote equal opportunity –if well administered.

We all know that equal opportunity, so often expressed by the law, has many obstacles in practice, thus the opportunity to access employment, education, decent wages, and other fundamental rights is not in fact equal for everyone, it is affected by issues of gender, age, race, educational level, etc.

Indeed, even when there formally exist rules against discrimination and it is established the equality between men and women, adults and youth, and any other distinction that could be made based on the particular characteristics of individuals, not all of them arrive at this starting point with the same opportunities.

For those reasons, the concept of “positive action” has increasingly been used in labour relations in order to correct the situations of discrimination or unequal work opportunities. Positive action consists in having a formally unequal treatment in order to benefit a historically discriminated or disadvantaged group, so as to guarantee an authentic equality situation with respect to other groups.

Positive action may be articulated at two levels:

- Positive action measures: are specific actions with the aim of eliminating a certain obstacle for equal opportunities in a short term.
- Positive action programmes: are complex actions aiming at achieving, at a medium or long term, real equality between diverse groups within a specific framework.

Positive action may be developed from multiple fields, being vocational training one of them. We will now consider some examples of positive action which make use of vocational training as a fundamental feature:

- *Young workers who have just been hired by the enterprise:* although it is often the case that when youth incorporates to enterprises they have higher academic merits than the adults, they usually have scarce previous experience. Training actions specially devised for them may contribute to making up for that lack of experience so that it does not become an obstacle for their personal

development. In other cases, youth may have preparation or qualification deficits which may also be overcome by special action.

- *Adult workers must face technological changes in the contents of their work and in the procedures to carry out:* even workers who have a long career inside an occupation or an enterprise may be affected by these types of changes, turning them into a vulnerable group. Updating or re-qualification actions are some of the alternatives that should be available to those workers.
- *Workers with disabilities:* there are much more people with disabilities than one would imagine. Apart from serious and clearly evident disabilities, many workers suffer from slight disabilities which also bring about consequences for their activities and professional development. An appropriate acknowledgement of this factor becomes both an opportunity to promote specific training actions and an element to be considered by all such actions in order to achieve their goals.
- *Women workers with children:* women are typically the most systematically disadvantaged group in labour relations. This fact, which is easily confirmed by endless situations, is frequently reinforced by the double condition of being young and a mother. Despite the importance of formal regulations against women discrimination, they do not solve the whole problem, since formal equality does not automatically mean real equality. Vocational training may participate both from the point of view of designing actions to contemplate the situations faced by women workers so that they may have effective access to this opportunity of professional development, and by teaching values among all workers –men and women– so as to contribute, even if not entirely, to promote a cultural change reaching both the labour and the domestic environments.

Training and labour career

Labour career refers to the route or path followed by a worker whether within an enterprise or in the labour market. Historically, careers have been associated with the first feature, since workers used to stay for long periods or even during their entire labour life in the same enterprise. Nowadays the second situation is more often the case, since instability and labour rotation are becoming common practice.

The labour career is made up of a series of aspects: the enterprises where workers have had a job, the positions held, the duties assumed, the tasks or types of activities developed, and, of course, the qualification acquired throughout their labour life. But there are other kinds of relationships between training and labour career.

In the first place, training has the task of both preparing to develop a satisfactory labour career and accompanying such career through the necessary

complementation, updating, or specialisation for the different moments and situations workers go through.

Secondly, and ideally, the labour career should be conceived in comprehensive terms, not only taking into account aspects such as the enterprise where they have worked at, the tasks carried out and the positions or responsibilities held, but also the own training process developed by the worker throughout his life. As it has already been said, this training process is both composed of formal processes (courses, programmes, seminars) and informal ones (knowledge acquired at work). In this sense, labour career and professional career would probably be interchangeable terms.

Third, what matters most to the worker and the trade union: guaranteeing the access to training opportunities, as well as recognising qualifications formally or informally acquired, constitute a highest order tool for negotiating better working conditions, wages and labour progress in general.

