

Background

- *European Year of Skills welcomed by Social Partners*

The European Year of Skills is an action based on a long-lasting activity of the EU in the field of Education and Vocational Education and Training (VET), including many aspects and activities at EU level, such as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the Build Up Skills initiatives, the Skills Council and Pact for Skills, the Erasmus, Leonardo da Vinci and other programs (today Erasmus+) and many more.

These EU activities are based on the individual right of quality vocational education, as enshrined in the European Charter of Social Rights (Article 14) and in the European Pillar of Social Rights. The Commission's proposal for the European Year of Skills aligns especially with principles 1, 4 and 5 of the European Pillar of Social Rights and contributes to the objectives of the 2020 European Skills Agenda.

Furthermore, the various EU initiatives and programs aim at providing the needed skills and meeting the ever-changing economic processes and challenges of expected demographic changes. The [Decision](#) for a 'Year of Skills 2023' focuses also on the widespread 'shortage of staff'.

The European Social Dialogue of the Woodworking and the Furniture Industries welcomed very much the launch of the European Year of Skills and try to contribute with its own activities and initiatives. Traditionally, we pay high attention to the field of IVET and CVET. We created specific working groups in both Social Dialogues (furniture and woodworking) on VET and merged them. We run regularly joint social partner projects, such as the 'Foster VET Mobility' project (focusing on mobility of apprentices), the Bolster Up projects I & II (focusing on the concept of European core qualifications and the improvement of curricula), the [Sawyer](#) and the [Digit-Fur](#) projects (both focusing on the green transition and digitalisation and their effects on our sectors), or the ResilientWood project (focusing on needed skills, Erasmus+ and the attractiveness of the wood sectors), to name just a few.

- *Future changes and skills need in our sectors due to twin transition*

The green transition and digitalisation (twin transition) are expected to bring changes in labour markets and do not only demand building on existing skills but also developing new skills, resulting in the need to attract experts of different professions.

At the moment, Europe's woodworking and furniture industries employ over 2 million people in more than 300,000 businesses, the majority of which are small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), covering a diverse spectrum of professions. Labour shortages is however a common challenge in both industries, partly because of a lack of skilled workforce and partly from a mismatch between the competencies required by companies and those provided on the VET side.

Our industries help to keep employment in Europe by fostering excellence in the European manufacturing ecosystem through sustainable and quality products with high design standards. We support a low-carbon bioeconomy and circular economy and contribute to the Green Deal objectives, for example via the use of wood and wood-based products - wood being a naturally renewable bio-based resource with carbon storage capabilities – and by fostering longer product lifetime and designing products for reuse, repair, remanufacturing and refurbishing, as well as by transitioning to circular business models.

- *The importance of upskilling and training the workforce and attracting new workers in the sectors*

In today's rapidly changing job market, companies need an agile and adaptable workforce to remain competitive. By investing in skilling and upskilling, companies ensure that their employees have the necessary skills to meet evolving industry demands. Supporting companies for skilling and upskilling is essential for fostering a skilled, adaptable, and competitive workforce that can thrive in today's dynamic business environment. By providing skilling and upskilling opportunities, companies demonstrate a commitment to their employees' career advancement, leading to higher levels of job satisfaction and employee retention. At the same time, skilled employees are better equipped to drive innovation within their organizations. Employee training should be of high quality, effective and equally relevant for the worker and the employer. It should respond to the need for improving professional, soft and transversal skills and contribute to workplace and industry-related career development. Employee training offers should also respond to new and emerging developments in labour markets and enterprises. These offers should be tailor-made, innovative in terms of new training methods, take into account work organisation and made in a work-based environment. In addition, it should be accessible and benefit from pooling/mutualised resources within and between sectors.

Developing strategies to attract more young people to these types of careers is necessary to guarantee the continuity of the industry. This should start as early as school orientation, by communicating the educational and employment opportunities that the sector can offer.

- *The importance of collaboration between all relevant actors to address the skills needs of our sectors*

To address these common multifaceted challenges effectively, a collaborative and coordinated approach among all stakeholders and relevant actors is essential, while preparing the workforce for the evolving demands of the woodworking and furniture industries. Well-established structures for cooperation between the social partners and government regarding skills challenges are of major relevance.

For our industries, mainly composed by SMEs, it is difficult to keep up with the upcoming and fast changes due to a lack of resources and financial capacities. Therefore, it is important to develop synergies and cooperation with other actors.

According to the [Flash Eurobarometer on Skills shortages, recruitment, and retention strategies in SMEs](#), SMEs already apply a broad set of measures to find and retain workers. This includes efforts to make better use of talent within the company (e.g. staff mobility or job rotation), more investment in training, or increasing the attractiveness of jobs in terms of (non-) financial benefits. We can learn from those experiences, however we have to operationalise them to improve our policy setting.

Those practices and experiences occur against the background of two main tendencies. On the one hand, the ever-growing activity of the European Union in the field of VET, and on the other hand the somewhat linked tendency of an ever-higher complexity of the legal and organisational framework in the field of VET.

Social partners from the woodworking and furniture industries are committed to taking a proactive role in finding solutions for common labour force challenges and are therefore providing a number of recommendations to all responsible actors, including the EU institutions, the Member States, employment services, and industry, education and training providers, national social partners and

ourselves as European social partners. With our below recommendations, we try make a differentiation between the involved actors and levels, on both the vertical and horizontal levels.

Recommendations

European level (EU institutions and European Social Partners)

- Europe needs to foster a culture of upskilling throughout a person's career. Supporting new qualifications, investment in professional education, upskilling, continuous learning opportunities and upgrading workers' competences is crucial.
With the essential support of the European Commission, the Social Dialogue shall foster collaboration and alignment between all actors involved, from industry, to social partners, to training institutes and universities, national governments and EU institutions.
- The European Social Partners will foster the communication between the European actions / policies / programs and the national social partners / companies. An international approach should be developed to support mutual understanding and benchmarking regarding skills development.
- The European Social Partners will further promote the concept of European core qualifications, supporting the structured improvement of the quality of apprenticeships underneath the harmonization of VET structures or curricula.
- Vocational Education and Training (VET) system plays a critical role in skills development. VET is highly valued by employers due to its emphasis on practical job skills required in modern workplaces. Promoting and supporting Vocational Education Training considering differences in the Member States, increased mobility for apprenticeships via eg. Erasmus+ and cross-border cooperation, operationalised by activities and relevant actors at all levels (EACEA, etc...)
- The European Commission shall provide more tailor-made information and support material in all EU languages for potential users of Erasmus+ for apprentices. In particular, smaller firms need easy access to the program and support for the application procedure.
- EACEA shall provide detailed data on the use of Erasmus+ for apprentices on a yearly basis.
- The Erasmus+ for apprentices must be much better equipped financially and with corresponding staff at EACEA.
- The new European fiscal rules should not jeopardize investments for professional education and training. Investments in education and training need to be among the public spending priorities and exempt of financial cuts to secure a skilled workforce for a successful digital and green transition.

National / Sectorial Social Dialogue

- National social partners should be committed to negotiate skills, training and VET for employees a.o. in collective agreements.
- National Social Partners are requested to engage in European structures and initiatives, including the participation in public consultations related to the area of VET.

- National Social partners shall promote and support the updating of existing training schemes and curricula, especially in relation to green skills and digital competences as well as core vocational skills.
- National Social partners shall promote the on-the-job learning and work to improve the right for training period, and provisions regarding the costs and form of training.
- In view of the ageing workforce national social partners should create a structure in collaboration with companies in order to transfer knowledge of older workers to newcomers.
- National Social Partners shall engage in Erasmus+: creating information points for companies and apprentices, supporting the dissemination of information material and guidance for the use of Erasmus+.
- National Social Partners should as much as possible establish provisions in collective agreements for the proceedings of apprentice mobility and especially Erasmus+ action, establishing the right of every apprentice in our sectors to have a certain period of his or her apprenticeship in another country.

Governments

- Governments may offer incentives to small and medium manufacturing companies to support training programs for their employees to develop new skills related to emerging technologies, improve existing skills, or retrain workers for new roles within the industry. They should also introduce alternative financial models to pool/mutualise support to employee training between companies and sectors. In addition, Member States should ensure tripartite cooperation on the allocation of available public resources to employee training (see Cedefop database on bi-partite or tri-partite training funds). Companies should also be provided with incentives to incentivise lifelong learning; policy settings should be considered that would encourage the employment of over 55 years old unemployed workers.
- Governments may offer incentives to small and medium manufacturing companies to support the establishment of apprenticeship programs which will provide individuals with hands-on training and experience while earning a wage, helping to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-world application.
- Including refugees in the work environment could be a way to tap into a diverse talent pool and contribute to their integration into society. National Government should offer language and skills training programs to refugees to help them overcome language barriers and develop the necessary skills for the workplace. This can include language classes, vocational training, and job-specific skills development.
- The responsible national or regional authority shall, in collaboration with the social partner, create platforms for training providers and companies engaged in the support of Erasmus+ action.
- Improve mechanisms for identifying data on skills needs and the link between them and its use in education and training systems content. In many cases the sectoral and regional level is the most relevant for gathering reliable data on skills needs.
- Eliminate barriers for the mutual recognition of qualifications.
- Put in place a system to validate formal and non-formal learning in cooperation with social partners and trade/industry associations.
- Facilitate collaboration between industry and public employment services, technical teaching institutes, design institutes, universities, VET institutions and schools.

Company level (companies may apply the most suitable recommendations to them)

- Applying and improving skills intelligence tools: Identifying new skills shortages and needs, monitoring supply and demand for skills, identifying positions for which there is a shortage of skilled workers and collecting and sharing data on sectoral needs (skills gaps, skills mapping and development, skills forecasts).
- Engaging in Erasmus+: offering international experience to employees is improving attractiveness and improving skills.
- Developing long term training plans: Employee training should be based on appropriate skills assessments, designed according to the needs of workers, where relevant, and employers, and founded on forecasting the changes and developments in jobs, of the work tasks and the whole industry in general. This assessment should be part of a worker's competence development cycle, to be re-evaluated regularly. The European skills passport could be helpful in presenting a person's skills and competences.
- Creating networks with other companies to share costs for training (during working hours. For example: establishing joint training centers, exchange of employees, sharing training mentors or counsellors depending on the companies' structures. These networks could be a tool for knowledge transfer.
- Establishing a connection between schools and local companies to set the competencies required and cooperate to boost innovation on both levels (machinery, teaching methods, etc.).

Training providers

- Adapting curricula and qualifications to the changes and innovation
- Intensify collaboration with social partners
- Invest in and provide further education to trainers and teachers
- Identify through consultation with industry the skills needs that are emerging in today's rapidly changing job market.
- Creating networks for an increased use of Erasmus+, mainly targeting on the exchange of apprentices and supporting companies and individuals in using the Erasmus+ program