WORKSHOP C3: TACKLING SKILLS GAPS

1. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to identify key areas where increased and more effectively targeted investments in human capital are necessary to improve skills or address skills gaps. These areas relate to women's participation in the labour market and workforce participation in the knowledge society, including ICT access. Women represent the largest potential of so far untapped human resources. This potential must be unlocked by bridging current and future skills gaps in order to maintain a competitive and adequately skilled workforce in the EU and to anticipate demographic changes.

The EQUAL projects have shown that by using tailored approaches to reach specific target groups, access to ICT is open for people who did not have this opportunity before. Moreover, even the most difficult to convince target groups are being introduced in ICT in a way that motivates them to learn. Additionally, non-explored pools of competences are addressed and gaps between the educational level and labour market demand are being find solutions for by methods such as cross-mentoring and biographical approaches.

2. ISSUES

The workshop focused on tackling skills gaps and more specifically on the strategies to include disadvantaged target groups in ICT learning in order to bridge the digital divide in general as well as more specifically to address gender gaps in the labour market and in access to ICT. Two principal issues were discussed in this respect:

- Addressing the issue of adapting the workforce to the knowledge society, in particular how to make ICT accessible to everyone, especially disadvantaged groups;
- Addressing the issue of how to tackle sectoral and occupational gender gaps, whilst at the same time making a valuable contribution to diversifying and improving the skills of the European workforce.

The chair, Cestmir Sajda, Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Affairs in the Czech Republic, introduced the Workshop panel, which was composed of advocates of good practices in relation to the two issues, developed within EQUAL, and of potential users of these practices. He also introduced the facilitator of the session, Henri McLeish.

The chair explained that in the Czech Republic gender policy has been strengthened by the government Council for Equal Opportunities.

The issues this workshop addressed were posed as real challenges for the objectives set in the Lisbon Strategy and are very much at the heart of the EU Social Policy Agenda. The good practises produced by EQUAL in these areas should be transferred and mainstreamed. In the labour market many resources are still untapped, such as the potential of women. Investment in the workforce is therefore crucial.

How will society in 30 to 40 years se the technology we already have at this point in time? Efforts have to be targeted at making sure nobody is excluded from the labour market and that there is no digital divide. More people with more skills are needed to meet the demands on the labour market.

After the introduction of the panel by the chair, the session was broken down into the discussion of two issues: "Bridging the digital divide" and "Tackling gender gaps in ICT". Both issues were discussed between the advocates and the users as well as with the participants in the audience.

2.1. ISSUE 1: BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The good practice

Margarida Segard, Deputy Director of the Training Division of the Instituto de Soldadura e Qualidade and representative of the Portuguese DP F@do, started the session by describing their current work on developing new training methodologies such as e-learning skills.

The underlying idea within this DP was that the introduction to ICT and skills for disadvantaged groups has to go hand in hand with a new culture and mentality. The change in mentality is necessary in order to build up a self-sustaining model. The target groups such as women, unemployed, low-skilled people, prisoners, ethnic minorities, etc. do not believe in training programmes. They claim not to be interested in learning and not to have time to learn. For these people a change of mentality as well as a professional attitude is needed. By developing a new open and distance-learning project, this DP tried to integrate the target groups in the knowledge society and to generate new ideas for their working and social life.

In the DP a lot of stakeholders such as trainers, local mediators, employers have been involved. The employers were informed on the benefits of blended learning and e-learning. The trainers involved in the project were used as "e-tutors". The networking was crucial in order to change cultures and set up the project in an efficient and effective way.

In terms of achievements Margarida Segard mentioned the new blended learning method for specific disadvantaged groups. It involves knowing what their constraints and social, economic and educational profile is as well finding out what their availability is for a new learning process. The solution is to offer a one-to-one tailor made solution and thus using flexible training models. The investment in the beginning is therefore a bit higher but the costs gradually decrease once the training models are set in place.

The local network points for learning were set up within the local community such as a café where people come together usually to play cards, etc. This to ensure that the target group is easily reached and thus increasing their access facilities to learning as well as having them in their own environment instead of class rooms.

Furthermore in terms of results, it is clear that the target group has reached a higher self-esteem and that their social skills have been enhanced together with a better balance of their professional skills.

The debate

The first potential user was Carl-Ulrik Schierup, a professor of Sociology of Work at the National Institute for Working Life (NIWL) in Sweden. He explained that the context in Sweden is a bit different in terms that there is a high employment rate for both genders. Sweden is known for having an "ICT fetish". In Sweden a project called "Youth Cyber network" has been installed which is not depending on providers and is very useful for internal communication.

He confirmed through that during the ICT crisis in 2000, women and low-skilled employees were the first to be fired. The questions he posed were: how to attract highly qualified women and immigrants to specific jobs? Are specific organisational changes needed to succeed in that? Did specific discriminating factors came up with regard to employing disadvantaged groups? What kind of solutions have been offered in terms of overcoming these obstacles and barriers?

Mervi Huuskonen from the Finnish Confederation of Salaried Employees (STTK) asked about the involvement of social partners in the project.

Margarida Segard answered that the project had taken place in one of the poorest communities with high problems of integration and discrimination. The local network consisted of 22 employers and 13 local organisations which now work in a self sustainable model together with the e-learning institution. The employers involved were at first not informed with which target group they would be confronted because it was expected that they would not want to cooperate. This is the reason why no social partners were involved at first either. But now three the social partners are involved.

Thomas Murray from the Irish EQUAL managing authority said the problem is convincing policy makers in applying the good practices.

Margarida Segard once again stressed the sustainability within this project and the aim is now to integrate these flexible methodologies in the training models.

2.2. ISSUE 2: TACKLING GENDER GAPS IN ICT

The good practice

Sabine Lauterbach presented the second issue. She is responsible for ESF in Berlin and is also a member of the Senate Department for Economics, Labour and Women's Issues. She was involved in several DPs but for this presentation she concentrates on a specific gender mainstreaming in ICT DP and only on a few sub projects within that DP. She firstly explained the labour market situation in Berlin. There is 18% unemployment rate with a low demand for labour especially for women.

- One of the sub projects looked at the potential of the unemployed women and concluded that they had high qualifications but that they could not find a job. Alternatively, some firms, for example, in the media industry, were unable to fill their vacancies. The DP looked at the human potential available and the open vacancies and tried to match both sides whilst taking into account what can be done to increase the chances of the match. For example, the media sector had no regulated working hours which was not very attractive for working mothers. Therefore, within this sub project flexible childcare had been offered.
- A second sub project related to the lack of new skilled people. The biographical approach has been tested which involves looking at a person's skills already when they are still at school. In that way women can be made aware of the new jobs available on the labour market and to make sure that they are aware of the opportunities that exist. The added value of this biographical approach is that multipliers are being brought on board like for example teachers who then act as mediators. Moreover academics can be involved to identify the necessary tools for a specific job.

In general for all of the sub projects, professional networking and more particularly cross-mentoring has been very important in this DP. The impact is visible at different levels and there are spill-over effects in other sectors like for example telecom.

The debate

Florindo Ramos from RE-START Consulting and coordinator of the Portuguese National Thematic Network on Adaptability, was invited as a potential user. He welcomed the idea of strategic alignment between supply and demand and stressed how important it was to know what employers want. The biographical approach was much appreciated because of its promotion of the new attitude and this from an early age onwards. Both projects presented make clear how previous barriers like ICT can become an advantage in the end.

A representative of the Council of Europe commented on the current problem of mismatch of education and labour market needs. She insisted on the fact that more analysis should be done in this problem area. She additionally raised the issue of women and ICT in rural areas and women not being the creators of ICT programmes.

Sabine Lauterbach answered that now that they achieved good cooperation in the network; the idea is to incorporate ICT more closely in the work programme and to open up to all target groups.

A representative of a Greek DP questioned whether the approach suggested in the DP of Margarida Segard would be applicable to mentally ill people since they generally have a high inclination towards ICT and this could be an opportunity to enhance their skills towards employment.

A participant from Poland commented on this that lots of opportunities are given via ICT to disabled persons such as, for example, access facilities for blind people which give them a change to communicate equally.

Detlef Gerhardt from the European Commission saw the presentation as a way of overcoming the digital divide. He asked if there are some further ICT tools to overcome the divide that can be used much earlier in the process.

Sabine Lauterbach explained that it is important to already start with the use of ICT in kindergarten. It should be generally incorporated in the educational system.

The facilitator ended the workshop by summing up the following conclusions:

- It is possible to reduce the digital divide by looking at special needs and using ICT accordingly
- There are some questions on culture and attitudes such as for example the treatment of women in the labour market
- The biographical approach is important to trace back the important points for intervention. This is a comprehensive approach to change culture and mentality
- Networking and cross-mentoring such as matching supply of labour and labour market demands with each other
- EQUAL has identified some core issues that influence quality of life. Now it is time to make sure that the good practices are mainstreamed.