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RETURN - Employability and E-Learning: Start Working Effectively After Parantal Leave

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Abstract: Doing business today means that one encounters new challenges: globalisation, mastery of advancements in information and communication technology, and adaptation to increasing buyer's markets. For companies to compete in this environment, they must manage their knowledge and human capital effectively, which includes on-going on-the-job training for employee competency and skill mastery. Employees returning after parental leave are a special target group for this training: they need to quickly regain their employability. However, conventional corporate learning arrangements are often difficult for this target group, due to time and location restrictions. RETURN was developed as an answer to this problem - a human resources training program that aims to qualify employees at the end of parental leave to start working more effectively. Common goals of RETURN are to bring participants' technical and computer skills up-to-date, obtain necessary competencies in information and communication technology (ICT), keep participants' tuned into what is going on in the workplace and reduce training time requirements on the job, as well as to improve self-confidence, help participants' balance work and family responsibilities, and to create a learning culture and a positive attitude towards life-long learning. To test the extent to which RETURN can prove successful in these areas, an empirical survey (2004 - 2006) was implemented. It was revealed that participants exhibited a high rate of acceptance and satisfaction with the RETURN program, and that an average RETURN-course carries its own weight (costs) fivefold in terms of ROI.

Keywords: e-learning, Blended Learning, Employability, ICT, Gender Mainstreaming, Vocational Training, 360-degree Evaluation, Return on Investment

The Changing Significance of "Employability" in Germany

IN GERMANY, THE labour market has recently experienced fundamental changes affected by economic, technologic, demographic and social developments (Liening; Wiepcke 2004: 1) that lead to modified (more flexible) occupational patterns and the development of a knowledge-based society. Demographically, Germany will experience a steady decrease in population size and an ageing of its work force. At the same time, social values have also been changing. Older generations (born before 1965) have traditionally placed a high emphasis on occupation, job stability, and high performance. Younger generations (born after 1965) are placing a high emphasis on enjoyment of life, sports, leisure time, educational and cultural activities, and the compatibility of family life and occupation (Speck 2005: XV and Rump; Eilers 2006: 15).

These changes in priorities are a concern not only for employees, but also for the German government agency. If individuals, due to too minor qualifications and job dissatisfaction, remove themselves from the presently expected standards on the labour market, it might lead to unemployment. If there is a lack of qualified employees, the economic development of

businesses in Germany is influenced in a negative way. A minor or declining economic cycle has negative impacts on the financial power of the state and might endanger the social security systems. On the basis of these trends, the concept of "employability" has become increasingly important.

What is "Employability"?

The concept of "employability" refers to the ability of individuals to provide their labour based on their professional competence and practical skills as well as to offer the creation of added-value and their productive efficiency (Blanke; Roth; Schmid 2000: 9; Heijde; Van Der Heijden 2006: 449-476). It comprises characteristics that distinguish individuals with regard to their occupation as suitable or unemployable (Rump; Schmid o.J.: 4; Civelli 1998: 48). Not only the individuals themselves, but also the businesses and the government need to be concerned with "employability". While individuals are expected to build their own education and knowledge, the government and business sectors would also benefit from the establishment of the general framework for this expansion (Krafft; Wiepcke 2005).



The Specific Function of Individuals

One question that arises at this point is: Under which conditions are employees ‘employable’? The standard answer is that employees are employable if they possess abilities, skills and competencies that are

needed by the employer (business). This means professional competence, acquired primarily during vocational training, but it also includes interpersonal and organizational skills, called ‘key qualifications’ (see Illustration 1 for a display of competencies influencing employability).

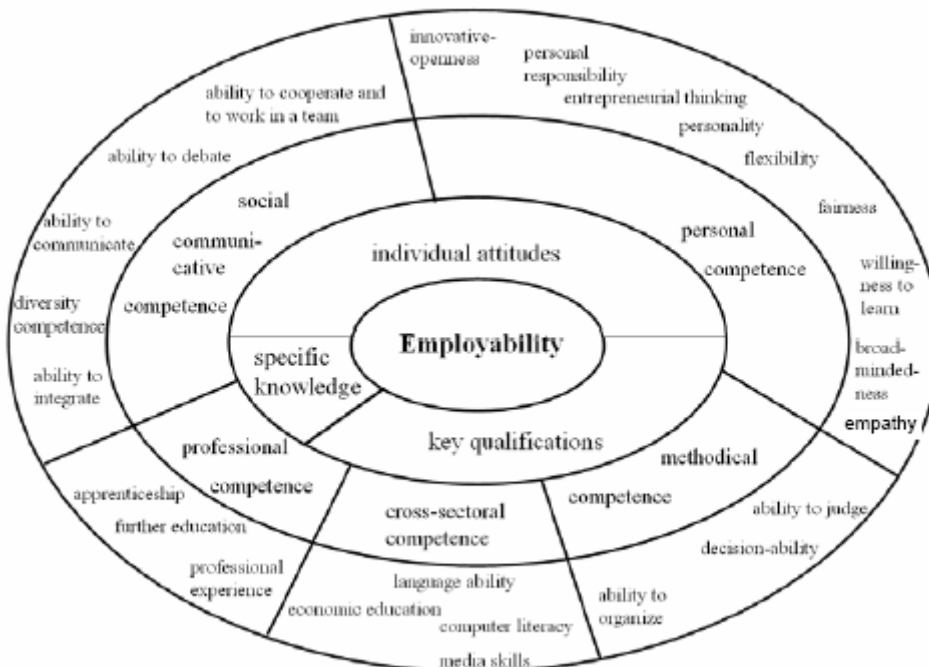


Illustration 1: “Employability” of Individual Subjects (Liening, Mittelstädt, Wiepcke 2006: 128)

But how can the subjects achieve “employability”? Whereas employees get their professional competence during the occupational training, key qualifications are developed through learning processes, which take place lifelong and activate the emotion and motivation (Heyse, Erpenbeck 2004: XX). Accordingly, individuals are expected to set goals for their professional future and to set them into action. They have to become “entrepreneurs for themselves” by recognizing the current needs on the market and by aligning their way of proceeding. This requires that the individual can recognize his or her own needs while also identifying their demand on the market (Blancke, Roth, Schmid 2000: 9). While doing so the personal “journey through life” should not be lost track of.

The Role of Businesses

“Employability” is, however, not only restricted to individual subjects. If businesses do not offer appropriate basic conditions, employees have almost no chance to develop themselves further. In turn, businesses gain via their employees’ “employability” in competitiveness. On the one hand due to the increased abilities to react and innovate, on the other

hand in particular due to an increased flexibility with regard to the employment (Rump, Eilers 2006: 24).

The requirements at an “employability-strategy” on the part of the business affect the business culture in particular, as an adaptation of thinking- and action patterns has to take place. The maintenance of the employees’ “employability” in particular requires an alteration of the classical qualification at the place of work. Further vocational training measures should be diversified with the help of an infrastructure based on information technology, for example computer assisted learning platforms for the implementation of blended learning scenarios (Zils 2005: 155 and Bruch, Sauter: 191). The employees’ loyalty is not acquired now due to job security, but instead due to diverse measures, which preserve the “employability”.

European Emergence of “Employability”

Several times “employability” was recommended by the European Commission as an instrument of prime importance for the support of the labour-market (European Commission 2002). In order to preserve Europe as a competitive location of industry and commerce, lifelong learning and, in particular, advanced vocational training are supposed to have

a high significance within the scope of the European “employability-strategy” (Weinert 2001: 192). According to a survey carried out by Eurostat (2004), nevertheless only 6 % of all employees (aged 25-64) in Germany (in Great Britain 21.3 %) participated in advanced vocational training in the year 2003. Highly trained employees participated in qualification/training measures six times more in comparison to less trained employees. It can be stated that the concept to maintain the “employability” has not yet arrived in the majority of German businesses.

Implementing “Employability” with the help of Blended Learning

The analysis of “employability” shows that as a consequence of the increase in employment opportunities, complexity rises, too. Now, business education is confronted with the challenge of training individuals not just in technical skills, but also in key interpersonal competencies. Blended learning, which offers a great variety of learning media, “learning rooms” and learning methods, can make a central contribution to the didactical application of learning scenarios, which comprise specific professional - as well as interdisciplinary components.

Concerning, for example, the choice of media, one can differentiate between offline- and online media. Offline media are media that support learning processes without a connection to the internet, such as, for example, CD-ROM, DVD, print media, video/TV etc. Online media, by contrast, focus on internet based networking, as, for example iPods, PDAs, PCs, notebooks, mobile phones, e-whiteboards. Online media allow the use of podcasting, wikis, e-mails, newsgroups, chats, application sharing, etc.

Blended learning (between on-and off-line applications) allows for the added benefit of alternating between learning sessions where attendance can be made obligatory, and decentralised learning scenarios. Thus, trainees can learn either individually or in groups, on site or online/off-line at different places. This spatial and temporal flexibility is a very important characteristic of blended learning. On a methodical level, the differentiation between asynchronous and synchronous communication plays a decisive role. Thus, an asynchronous communication between learner and learner can be established via one-to-one, one-to-many-e-mails or via discussion forums. A synchronous communication between learners can be carried out with the help of chatrooms, audio-/videoconferencing, whiteboard (application sharing). Obviously, the teacher-learner or rather coach-learner communication can be realised asynchronously or synchronously, too (Liening 2004: 1-63).

As to the variety of learning scenarios, one must, however, be careful about sliding into arbitrariness.

One may safely say that in the end it may not be a high degree of multimedia that makes the learning process a success, but rather the quality and epistemological orientation of that program (see Liening 1992; Liening 1999). In this context it is helpful to understand the German concept of ‘Bildung’, which must not be confused with the English expression “education” or the French expression “formation”. “Bildung” is closely connected to the idea of the freedom of the individual and the dignity of the human being, which are inalienable human rights and may, therefore, not be disregarded. Within the concept of “Bildung” people can only be considered ‘educated’, if they are able to act in a self-determined manner and take responsibility for the knowledge they acquire. In this way, education isn’t about memorizing facts and merely applying knowledge that has been passed down. Rather, education only works if the learner has studied a subject to such a degree that he/she understands the knowledge and develops a rationally founded, critical and constructive attitude towards it. Especially the behaviouristic approaches by Skinner and Watson are not appropriate for this education process, as they tend to condition and to socialise learners, instead of giving them the chance to become self-determined, critically-constructive and responsible employees, in order to strengthen the “employability” of the individual person (Liening 1992; Liening 1999).

RETURN – Implementing a Human Resource Development measure for Employees during Parental Leave

The following section of this paper describes the approach to an application for human resource development, using a blended-level approach to learning. This training was designed for the re-entry of employees after parental leave and was put into effect within the scope of an “employability-strategy” of a commercial bank located in Germany with approximately 1,200 employees, called Sparkasse Herford.

The financial service sector faces a unique problem: On the one hand, the financial service sector is characterised by an increase in productivity due to the intensified application of ICT. On the other hand, the market for financial services changed to an extreme buyers’ market with a high level of transparency. The outcome of this is a competitive environment that makes high demands on employability. In comparison to the occupational situation of employees three, five or ten years ago, nowadays the main occupation is in sales-oriented functions, with a high emphasis on technology-related skills. A particular subgroup with regard to the adjustment qualification within the necessary personnel modification constitute are the employees who return after parental

leave. In Germany parental leave can be up to three years per child. By reason of the necessity for qualification of this target group, options for organisational change arise, which can be used for the human resource transfer to customer-oriented operational areas.

Goals

The qualification measure RETURN deals with the long-term planning of the employees' re-entry after parental leave. The operative objectives of the Sparkasse are:

- to ease the compatibility of family and occupation for the returned employees,
- to enable the professional and social acclimatisation to changed working conditions,
- to reduce the period of vocational adjustment "on the job",
- to bring about the structuring of necessary applications for business policy reasons and
- to obtain the securing of skilled employees

Implementation

To achieve best possible quality, planning, structuring/ realisation and assessment of the qualification measure were incorporated into the seven levels of the 360-degree evaluation according to Wiepcke (2006). The first and second level comprise the recording of the target group and the basic conditions,

the third level aims at the determination of the didactical design. In order to obtain a holistic view with regard to the evaluation, in the first three levels internal and external experts as well as the persons concerned were interrogated. The internal experts included representatives of the staff council, persons in charge from the human resource development and the equal opportunity commissioner of Sparkasse Herford. The external expert council consisted of Dr. Andreas Liening, professor of Universitaet Dortmund and his team, as well as Dr. Dietmar Krafft, professor of Universitaet Muenster. The relevant people for an education measure were not only the (potential) participating persons, but also their colleagues as well as the respective executive. Analogical to the all around examination of a person with the help of the 360-degree feedback (Carson 2006: 395). As a control measure, people who returned to the workplace without RETURN training were interviewed. The socio-economic status of control group participants was recorded from different points of view, including qualitative interviews with six persons, as well as one respective colleague and one respective executive. Altogether, 18 interviews took place. All control group participants have returned to the workplace for at least six months, were employed in the sales division, and had been on leave for two to five years (median 3.0 years).

The interviews showed the following picture of the occupational re-entry:

Table 1: Statements of Participants being Affected by the re-entry

<i>returned personnel</i>	<i>executives</i>	<i>fellow employees</i>
<i>Enjoys the re-entry, especially in the fact that one can obtain acceptance outside of the family</i>	<i>Acknowledgement of the high dedication</i>	<i>Assistance is only needed sparsely (vocational adjustment less time-consuming than e.g. for apprentices)</i>
<i>Fear of the changed requirements, especially concerning the pressure to sell</i>	<i>Marketing orientation/ need recognition inadequately developed</i>	<i>Appear to be skilful and confident in the handling of customers</i>
<i>No participation in computer courses before</i>	<i>Instruction in computer system at the moment relatively long</i>	<i>After initial fear of contact, willingness to learn about computer system (and ability to learn)</i>
<i>Difficulties concerning products of connected companies</i>	<i>Background knowledge not up-to-date, insecurities in selective sales approach and products of connected companies</i>	<i>Take over rather routine jobs and avoid consultation-intensive tasks</i>
<i>Encouragement of the family limitedly available</i>	<i>Sensitive domestic situation</i>	<i>Under the prevailing circumstances relatively flexible concerning the working hours</i>
<i>Like working in a team</i>	<i>Support team work, but are rather shy concerning conflicts and have only few new ideas</i>	<i>Integrate themselves quickly into the team</i>
<i>Only contact to other returning persons by chance</i>		

The analysis of the separate statements and a comparison from different points of view resulted in a need for adaptation in the following areas:

- (re-) establish computer literacy
- refresh knowledge of strategy/ competitive environment/ branch office- and consulting service concepts
- enlarge abilities in teamwork and communication
- support work/ life balance (returning women have to incorporate their environment, i.e. family/ colleagues more strongly)
- work for a stronger sales orientation/ update knowledge of products, in particular products of linked businesses
- reduce fears/ facilitate re-entry/ establish connections with other returning women

Due to the general conditions (e.g. with regard to the familiar situation only limited opportunity to participate in seminars, which require presence) and in taking the above mentioned competence definitions into account, the following blended learning mix was composed:

- offline learning instruments (CD-ROM) for the learning by oneself phases, which combine

problem-oriented case study work with comprehensive text presentations, set to toned slide presentations, videos, interactive exercises and educational games

- attended classes at the beginning and end of every learning module in order to get to know other people/ to establish networks and for activation/ motivation
- group works on the basis of problem-oriented case studies for consolidation and for the transfer of specialised knowledge worked out before
- suitable mentoring of target group with the help of tele-tutoring
- use of an electronic learning platform with variegated communication- and administration functions (e.g. discussion forum, chat, test etc.)

Table 2: Modules – Procedure and Contents

<i>Module/Subject Matters</i>	<i>Procedure/Contents</i>	<i>Computer Application</i>
<i>Kick-off workshop: activation and introduction</i>		
<i>01 Well-informed strategy/organisation of the “Sparkasse” factor of success: quality individual personnel development</i>	<i>Instrument to learn 01 – “Sparkasse “in competition case study” quality wins “group work” teaser offers”</i>	<i>bases operation system e-mail/ internet text processing</i>
<i>interim workshop: reflection and transition</i>		
<i>02 Well-organised compatibility of family/occupation time management communication/behaviour in conflict situations</i>	<i>Instrument to learn 02 – “family and occupation in balance “ case study” teamwork “group work” project planning”</i>	<i>learning platform Groupware</i>
<i>interim workshop: reflection and transition</i>		
<i>03 Good in Sales successful constitution of customer contacts integral finance concepts</i>	<i>Instrument to learn 03 – “all-around financial advice “ case study” successful marketing in an integral way”</i>	<i>learning platform sales supportive applications</i>
<i>completion workshop</i>		

The performance measurement within the scope of management control in education serves for the recordation of utility and costs of the further education measure and for the prove of its usefulness. Layers four to seven of the 360-degree evaluation according to Wiepcke are designed to measure the acceptance (4th), the learning success (5th) and the achievement of objectives (6th) as well as to estimate the effects on the business success (Wiepcke 2006).

About 4th to 6th Layer

In the case under consideration the aspects satisfaction, learning success and the successful transfer of knowledge were taken up and analysed in a multi-perspective way. At first the participants' felt satisfaction and the learning success were surveyed. The achievement of a minimum of satisfaction and learning success is an essential requirement for the overall success of the measurement. The felt satisfaction was analysed with the help of quantitative questionnaires, the learning success was investigated

by the assessment of the solutions of the case studies. Apart from that the RETURN participants and their executives were interviewed in an ex post evaluation (six months after re-entry) concerning the transfer of subject matter into the context of the occupation and concerning the felt “employability” in different phases of the re-entry. In a second step the development of the RETURN participants' “employability” was contrasted with a comparison group. The comparison group consisted of persons, who had returned before and had not taken part in the RETURN measure. It has to be pointed out that the interviews of this comparison group and their executives were carried out six months after their re-entry, but the data collection already took place within the scope of the ex ante evaluation in the year 2004. Although the significance of the results should not be over-emphasised due to the explorative character, the chosen indicators establish resilient operationalisation characteristics. The reliability fulfils the quality factors of qualitative social research.

Table 3: Performance Measurement RETURN

Partial constructs of the performance measurement	RETURN-participants	Comparison group
Satisfaction with RETURN per self-evaluation of the participants at the end of the measure	83.1 %	
Learning success RETURN assessment of solutions of case studies per tele-tutoring during the measure	87.6 %	
Satisfaction with work-life-balance per self-evaluation of the participants six months after re-entry	75.7 %	53.8 %

The percentages of the partial constructs shown in table 3 result from an average (arithmetic average) of the individual evaluations, which are listed as a mark equivalent in percentage values (e.g. a superior grade – A = 97 %). Generally, as satisfaction level a heuristic value of 80 % as a minimal value should be achieved. Consequently, the satisfaction and the learning success of the RETURN participants can be regarded as completely satisfied. The comparison of measured values of RETURN participants and the comparison group shows, with regard to the work-

life-balance, a significant increase in the satisfaction (+ 21.1 percentage points).

But how does this result have an impact on the “employability” and the business success?

About 7th Layer

One might tend to deduce that from the increased competence and satisfaction of the RETURN-participants results an increased performance. Often, the evaluations of further vocational trainings remain at such a vague judgement, but thus a verification of the utility is highly speculative.

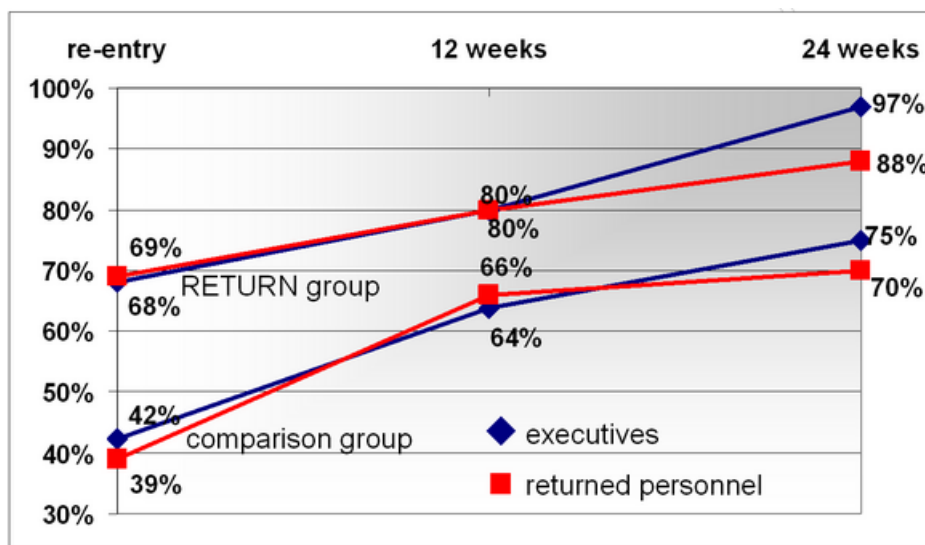


Illustration 3: Development of "Employability" with the help of RETURN

It is a valid method of management control to detect benefits of “employability” gains and to rate it in proportion to the connected costs, which means that the return on investment (ROI) is determined. Illustration 3 illustrates the development of the “employability” of RETURN participants and the comparison group within the first six months after their re-entry. As a reference (=100 %) the “employability” of an incorporated female employee with similar areas of responsibility and the same contractual relationship was chosen. The “employability” can also be expressed in effective working hours. As the weekly

hours of work of the RETURN- as well as of the non-RETURN-participants amount to 20 working hours, it means that a RETURN-participant, e.g. within the first week after the re-entry, effectively worked 13.8 hours (20 h x 69 %) of her 20 working hours, whereas a non-RETURN-participant effectively worked about 8.2 hours (20 h x 41 %). The weekly differences concerning the effective working time can be added to a total of about 100 hours of work within the first six months per returned woman. In addition, it has to be added that the RETURN-participants do not perform the workload of the fur-

ther training (the RETURN-course designed for 120 learning hours) during the working time but during their leisure time. The outcome of this is a total utility, resulting from the further training measure, of 220 working hours, as the RETURN-participants are effectively available to a greater extend. If these working hours are multiplied by the average hourly wage rate and are contrasted with the costs of the education measure, it adds up to a ROI of about 5:1, i.e. 500 % (RETURN-course of 10 participants).

Conclusion

In the course of the conclusion of an empirical study it is important to question critically, to what extend validity can be taken for granted and if, possibly, the results of the study are distorted by the study itself. With regard to the Hawthorne effect, a phenomenon of group based observational studies (Schuler 2005: 76f.), it certainly can be detected that a change of the persons' natural behaviour cannot be eliminated. In the business studies, a discussion about the Hawthorne effect leads to the opinion that the human job performance is not only shaped by the objective working conditions, but also by social factors (Thommen 2002: 35). Therefore it is almost desirable to cause this effect by the implementation of personnel development measures for returning persons and even to intensify this by accompanying evaluation.

The RETURN-measure clarifies impressively the effectiveness of the "employability" approach for

individuals and businesses as well as the efficiency of arrangements for the implementation of the approach based on blended learning. "Employability" as a basis for personnel development strategies can result in an increase of the business success, but it also produces a reciprocal claim and a new responsibility. For businesses, "employability" implies, to be increasingly responsible for the employees' biographies. This responsibility is not only expressed, concerning the parental leave, in the promise to provide a job after the parental leave, but also in the systematic planning and structured implementation of the re-entry. In contrast, employees are responsible for a constant further qualification. They have to be prepared to educate themselves further during the working hours as well as during their leisure time and respectively at the end of their parental leave. Due to the recourse to employees' leisure time, new goal conflicts arise, as the majority of people attach a great importance to private life. Very often it is impossible to reconcile the care of the family in particular with sessions, where attendance is obligatory in seminars. Pure learning by oneself again leads to isolation and minor learning success. The diversity of occupational and private moral concepts as well as the fulfilment of the requirements flexibility and globality require innovative further education concepts. An answer to this provides the blended learning model, which supports "employability-strategies" with its inherent variety and is able to "pave the way" for an improved work-life-balance.

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Ewald Mittelstaedt, Master of Science in Business Management, is a research fellow in business education at Universitaet Dortmund. Ewald currently lectures undergraduate and postgraduate students in the areas of applied business education and business gaming with focus on computer-based learning. His research interests lie in the areas of Educational Management, E-Learning and Self-Organization.

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