

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>From Continuing Vocational Training to “Lifelong Learning” in France and European Union</b></p>
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Continuing vocational training (CVT) in France and in Europe is a recent development. Now about 30 years old, it has reached maturity, as it were, and it is now possible to assess its achievements and outline its future potential.

Starting from experience carried out in France and in Europe, a tentative framework can be derived which could provide tools for reading country- and context-specific situations.

**First of all, a country cannot invest for the future without appropriate resources for establishing the training needs necessary for that future.**

Knowledge of the reality and evolutions of continuing vocational training (CVT) in France is easy accessible. Indeed, a legal framework requests the annual publication of key figures concerning, among others, investments in training by companies, number and type of salary workers having access to training and of companies proposing training, amounts invested by companies or sectors of economic activity, type and duration of training etc. Among all European countries, France surely has the sharpest information system about CVT policies and practice developed by public authorities and implemented by companies.

Knowledge of the field of CVT in the European Union is more difficult to gather. Indeed, in the 1990s, no instrument was available for

identifying how the different countries were investing in the skills and qualification of their workforce. It was my pleasure to visit European capitals in 1987 so as to gather information and to propose coherent and converging criteria. Such criteria were meant to enable the European Commission to work out the first tentative surveys on the investment in CVT by European companies.

The aim for the Union was to establish motivating CVT policies to ensure worldwide economic competitiveness. As early as 1993, a first CVTS survey led to the conclusion that European companies were not competitive in terms of investment in and access to training. It also pointed out the need for a real training and competence culture among the various economic players. A new CVTS survey has just been finalized, including EU Member States as well as candidate countries. The results are about to be published and should provide decision makers with a reliable image of the efforts to be made by European economic players to achieve a common skill and qualification area and to establish a real lifelong learning dynamic, beyond formal training systems and arrangements.

The first lesson to be drawn from these information tools and systems lies in the awareness that no country is able to lead a consistent policy a economic competitiveness without a clear vision of the qualifications available and, hence, the strategic competencies necessary for a successful positioning on the worldwide market. At a time when the different national economic systems rely more and more on the level of knowledge they require, a lack of investment in identifying and increasing that knowledge would threaten their future.

This introduction to the way in which France and the European Union have progressively built their training and qualification systems is

not meant to be taken as a model for Thailand, since it is part of a specific historical and cultural context. It simply aims to illustrate how common systems and partnerships between the different training players can lead economic and social policies to focus on people's skills and qualifications.

### **The structure of CVT in France**

The purpose here is not to present an history of CVT in France, but rather to show how the way in which it was set up – at both institutional and legislative levels – still influences today the whole issue of vocational training for salaried workers.

France can be taken as an example in that it presents us with a most elaborated system where all legal, economic and political steps were taken to force companies to invest in training. At the same time France chose for social democracy, i.e. the joint commitment of political, economic and social players to succeed in raising the level of qualification among salaried workers.

Whatever the debate about the evolution of a more than 30 years-old law, no government, whether right or left wing, has ever questioned its objectives. On the contrary, all living forces of the country agree today that further headway should be made in terms of training and qualification, and that it might be time to find new ways to raise the general level of skills among employees and young people expecting to integrate the labor market.

### **Some historical landmarks**

When, in July 1971, France adopted its basic Law for CVT, its first aim was, via the setting up of new regulations in the field of vocational and technological education, apprenticeship and vocational training, to meet the huge needs of companies for qualified labor required by the major economic and social changes of the times.

Before the Law was adopted, there had been a horizontal agreement between the social partners. This showed that the new legislation resulted from a desire to develop a democratic approach in the area of vocational training. More explicitly still, it leant vocational training the role of a major tool for the modernization of the country.

Simultaneously, the Law opened up a new area for qualification – that of companies. To that effect, it defined guidelines which still today structure the entire issue of CVT in France:

- Training must enable companies to have the necessary skills in order to adapt to and, if possible, follow current developments. Companies, therefore, must give themselves the means for adapting, thus developing training during working time and considering it as a yearly training plan.

- Training must also enable individual workers to improve their professional and social status: each salaried worker must thus be able to benefit from training leave.

- Employers must compulsorily contribute financially to training. The Law thus fixes a minimum threshold of 1.1% of the wage bill (any money left unspent to be paid to the Treasury) to be spent on training. This compulsory levy (which has now been upped to 1.5%) and the awareness it raised in

companies triggered a mechanism without which many training actions would never have been launched.

- The Law officialises the principle of social discussions, i.e. it compels employers and trade unions to negotiate on the conditions and applications of CVT.

- According to the Law, a discussion needs to take place between the different Ministries involved in the implementation of vocational training. It also imposes coherence between measures taken by public authorities in the field of initial vocational training (IVT) and CVT, as well as in general, technological and vocational education.

The 1971 Law is only a first step toward a series of agreements and discussions about various measures still applicable to CVT.

- The first measure was initiated and placed under the responsibility of social partners. It consisted in organizing on- and off-the-job training for young people. The aim was to provide young people who had difficulty integrating the labour market with the qualifications required to find a job and to give companies the opportunity to find a workforce which could adjust to rapid industrial and organizational change. A contribution corresponding to 0.4% of the global salary expenses of companies allowed the launch and the funding of that action.

- The second measure concerns the implementation of a training time capital. While the 1971 Law had established the individual right to training thanks to training leaves, the new arrangement supported by social partners made the interests of employers and employees coincide. The arrangement was

implemented in the framework of a sector agreement on who needs training, how long he/she should be trained, in which area etc. The arrangement was financed for the half by employers' contributions and for the other half by the annual training programme established by the employee's company.

More than 45% of the current agreements foresee at least 120 hours of training per employee and focus on adapting the company to new technologies.

□ The third measure refers to a joint investment in training. It gives employers the opportunity to organize part of the employee's training outside working hours, provided training leads to recognized qualification and provided the employer acknowledges the employee's involvement in training.

□ The fourth measure recognizes the right for the employee to take one or more day(s) off for a skill audit. Such a measure should be envisaged in the framework of a set of rights which enable any individual to re-consider his/her vocational pathway and to choose the corresponding training and qualification orientations.

□ The last measure was taken at the end of last year and is applicable to any person in activity. It provides anyone with the right to get his/her professional experience validated after three years and so, to reach a level of qualification which hitherto was restricted to graduates and owners of official diplomas. And in spite of a French culture deeply rooted into the prominence of IVT, the Law recognizes the right for all to get any degree or title by validating experience.

This last Law came into effect in the Spring of this year and sheds new light on the history of CVT in France. It turns the 1971 Law into a first step toward a utopia involving the whole French vocational training system and all its players (public authorities, social partners, companies : the opportunity for any individual to get his/her lifelong learning process recognized and validated.

From France to Europe: CVT becomes part and parcel of European policy

During the 70s and the 80s, CVT expanded dramatically in France. Salaried workers expressed a strong demand for taking part in training actions. Over the years, training and human resources managers, more particularly in large companies, developed yearly training plans which were then discussed with workers' representatives. Training expenditures of large companies and in some industrial and economic sectors reached beyond 3 or 4% of the wage bill and led to the issue of training as an investment and as a strategic tool for companies. Specific bodies were established to collect the training levy paid by small and medium-sized companies and help them adjust the training of their workers to their own needs.

By the end of the 80s, training became a key issue for the European Commission (this coincided with the nomination of J.Delors - who had been behind the French Law – as President of the European Commission). There followed numerous debates and policy discussions out of which the following points may be singled out:

□ Europe would not be able to master its economic, social and technological changes unless it invested in training within companies. According to the slogan of the time – which is still viable today - «there can be no competitiveness for companies without workers’ competencies».

□ As in the case of France, the setting up and development of in-company training was the responsibility, first and foremost, of employers and trade-unions – and thus of the social dialogue – rather than of individual States. The European Commission took the initiative of setting up what has since been called the «Social Dialogue» at European level. Numerous meetings between the social partners worked to promote CVT on issues such as access to training for the least qualified workers and contributed to raising the awareness of many European countries on the importance of developing the qualifications of already-employed workers..

In order to strengthen this process, the European Community launched a series of CVT programmes financing transnational projects aimed at encouraging good training practices in companies and creating partnerships between countries that might lead to innovative and cooperative networks. These programmes are still being run today.

The essential added value of European Commission action programmes like Leonardo da Vinci was to initiate joint training projects associating employers’ organizations, training institutions and social partners to ensure that the provision of CVT comply with the needs of the workforce as well as of companies.

A relevant example of projects funded by the can be found in the automotive sector, where the European sector organization of car

manufacturers started by identifying future competence gaps and quickly drew a series of professional profiles where new training pathways were required. From that preparatory work of identification, the different European car manufacturers worked in close partnership with training providers to set up and implement new curricula so as to enable salaried workers and their companies to anticipate industrial and technological change. A similar project was carried out for car mechanics, in which 8 training organizations from 6 European countries collaborated with some 8,700 micro-companies from the 'Euromechanic' network.

Simultaneously, the EC had set up information and data banks on training practices in different Community countries and launched a series of studies on the different training practices during and outside working time. There again, CVT became an instrument for modernizing European economy.

### **An analysis of today's main trends: from CVT to Lifelong Learning**

A brief analysis of French and European achievements in the field of CVT may be summarized as follows:

- companies have by now recognized the importance of training their salaried workers in order to take into account the ever-accelerating changes and progressive globalization of the economy. A negative aspect of this is that the training imparted so far over-benefits workers who are already trained and varies according to the economic situation. It is still considered as necessary but not always as a strategic tool.

□ What is important finally, is less to have trained workers than to have competent workers. This statement which is becoming increasingly more evident in companies displaces the focus from CVT to the fact that workers acquire skills in a number of ways: through the working situation, informal training, devolution of responsibilities, participation in project management, tutorship, etc. The move of CVT towards apprenticeship does not do away with the necessary investment in training but rather engenders two new requirements. First, that companies need to set up «qualifying» structures enabling workers to maximize what they learn at work. Second, that companies and public authorities must recognize the competencies acquired through professional experience.

□ If training must remain a duty for companies, it is also the workers' responsibility. It is thus essential to give workers the means to increase their skills while (through the establishment of a stock of time to be used for training or through a personal training account), while setting up training courses enabling both workers and the company to invest together in skills and qualifications.

In relation to this summary of the existing situation, there are a number of challenges that must be addressed by countries and the economic and social partners in order to maintain or increase their social and economic competitiveness.

**Challenge nr.1:** in the face of increasing technological and organizational changes, companies, particularly SMEs, must invest heavily in workers' qualifications if they wish to survive in an

increasingly competitive environment. This investment must not only be financial but, in all cases, must result from a consensus between the various actors concerned.

For instance, the largest French telecommunication company had to requalify the skills of part of its middle management staff, whose area of expertise was no longer adapted to the challenges the company was confronted with. The company decided to invest into the requalification of more than 1,000 collaborators in areas like computer-based applications, Internet and intranet development and services, client relationship management (CRM) etc. The return on investment for the company was particularly rewarding in that the level of performance of computer technologists after an eleven-month requalification process was comparable to that of graduates in computer sciences. The whole experience resulted in a sustainable ‘win-win’ employer-employee relationship.

**Challenge nr.2:** over and beyond an investment policy, companies are required to develop a skilling policy for their workers, i.e. to have a clear vision of the real skills workers have acquired, to link training policy with the strengthening of these skills and examine with the public authorities and the social partners the ways and means to recognize and validate these skills.

As an example, a European benchmarking of vocational competencies was set up for craft print workers by their sector organization, in close co-operation with training centres and testing bodies. The partners developed and validated an international measurement system which was used by all kinds of organizations in

the sector to assess standards of competencies and qualifications. National and international steering groups were created, comprising senior technical experts and employers, to oversee the various phases of the work, including the testing of appropriate national vocational qualification tools. The outcome of the project was a comparable benchmarking scheme which took into account the skills acquired by craft print workers in the course of their everyday practice.

**Challenge nr.3:** the organization of training and the skilling process of salaried workers must be based on clear choices concerning the organization of the training market, its financing (who pays and how, how can one ensure the transparency of this market); it should also be based on justified choices regarding the organization of the skill validation process (who validates and how, should one have a single or different systems of validation?).

If we consider the French system, the three forms of qualification, i.e. the degree resulting from educational systems, the national vocational qualification framework, and the qualifications recognized by sector or professional bodies, have to involve the main players of any validating process : public authorities, employers' and employees' representative bodies, training organizations and, of course, companies. In this context, validation is not only a technical procedure, but also a social process. And since the new Law referred to above imposes the publication of all qualifications recognized by the different interested parties, transparency and access is ensured for any individual worker in search of reskilling or validating of the competencies acquired in the course of his professional life.

Taken from a European angle, the same kind of synergism can be found in a large variety of economic sectors, like Hotel Management, Hospital Management and Healthcare sector, the Welding Industry, Multimedia Production etc. The same categories of partners were associated in defining and validating competencies and the role of each player was clear and transparent from the start.

This transparent dimension is a key factor in validation processes. Indeed, transparency does not only relate to legibility but also, and mainly, to the conditions in which validation is to take place. Who will finance the whole process? The various European training systems and arrangements do not provide the same answer to that question. From one country to another, sources differ for financing validation: in some cases public authorities impose co-financing from companies, in others specific funds were created by the different players involved. All the same, whichever system is applied, what really matters is the existence of a sustainable reference framework where mid- or long-term policies can benefit both the workforce and the industry.

We are nowadays in an economic and social system within which knowledge and competencies are part of the future wealth of a country. The country in question must thus organize itself in order to develop this asset with the actors concerned and according to an organizational model that finds its roots in the specific context of the country, while taking into account international experience.