Cross-sectional audit of measures to combat skills shortages in selected professions

State Secretariat for Economic Affairs – State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation – State Secretariat for Migration

Key facts

As in several neighbouring countries, Switzerland is experiencing a shortage of qualified employees in a number of sectors. Since 2011, the Confederation has launched two separate programmes to combat the shortage of skilled workers and boost the potential of the Swiss workforce. Budgets totalling several hundred million Swiss francs have been made available for the measures included in these programmes.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) decided to analyse whether the competent organisations and authorities had identified the shortages in good time, and whether they had taken coordinated and targeted measures. In carrying out its analysis, the SFAO focused on professions in three areas of the MINT sector (mathematics, information technology, natural sciences and engineering), namely the machine, electrical and IT sectors. The SFAO also looked at the measures managed by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO), the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI) and the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM).

Both the Confederation and professional organisations have been aware of the signs of a shortage of qualified employees for many years. The professional organisations adopt targeted measures in line with their available resources, while the Confederation supports the economy through subsidiary measures in collaboration with the cantons. However, it is clear that the measures taken by the various players are not helping to reduce the shortage of qualified employees in the sectors analysed. For example, companies and professional organisations are not succeeding in creating enough apprenticeships or making their professions more attractive. As for the authorities (Confederation and cantons), their actions have not had any significant impact. The SFAO believes that further action is needed to promote vocational training in the Swiss education system.

Causes of shortages differ depending on the sector, and the consequences are not analysed by the Confederation

Economic actors play a key role in combating the shortage of skilled workers. The Confederation is not legally obliged to adopt any measures in this area. However, it must ensure that the framework conditions in the areas of employment, training and immigration, among others, are adapted to the needs of the economy.

The professional organisations are aware of the shortage of qualified employees and are analysing the causes in an attempt to remedy the situation. The causes can vary depending on the sector. For example, there may be a lack of apprenticeship places available in the IT sector, or a negative assessment of working conditions or reputation in the other sectors examined. The professional organisations are able to assess the current situation, but are

not always in a position to determine how it is developing. The SECO published a shortage index for each profession in 2016, and again in 2023. This publication is useful for the professional organisations and the cantons in order to determine the level of structural shortages. However, it is not published on a regular basis and does not provide any outlook on future developments. In response to a parliamentary procedural request in 2023, the Federal Council plans to produce a report on the causes and consequences of the shortage for the Swiss economy. This report could assist political decision-making.

The measures are having only a limited impact

Not all companies have taken action, and the targeted measures taken by the professional organisations for each sector are limited by the resources and means at their disposal. It is clear that the resources deployed by the players in the sectors analysed have not been sufficient to fully resolve the shortages.

For its part, the Confederation has launched two programmes of measures, the first in 2011 entitled "Qualified workers initiative" (FKI) and the second in 2019 designed to strengthen the promotion of Swiss workforce potential. In the absence of measurable objectives, the relevance and effectiveness of these programmes cannot be assessed. Several measures are likely to have an impact on the MINT sector. However, according to the professional organisations and companies in the sectors analysed, certain measures are not widely known about. The federal measures have not had any significant effect on solving their shortage problem, despite the substantial sums invested.

Each office managed its measures independently and one office was designated to coordinate each of the federal programmes. On the whole, collaboration and coordination between the federal offices and with the other stakeholders (social partners, cantons, professional organisations) worked well for the federal measures. The stakeholders were involved in the working groups and in the decision-making process. However, given the number of players involved, consensus-building could be challenging and time-consuming.

Challenges for vocational training's image

The Confederation is not in a position to resolve the specific problems facing each sector (reputation, working conditions). On the other hand, it must ensure, as part of an evaluation, that the financing of training does not hinder people wishing to pursue higher vocational training.

A significant proportion of federal public policies and measures are implemented at operational level by the cantons. The cantons adopted a national strategy for vocational, academic and career guidance in 2021. One of the objectives is to enable as many people as possible to participate in the labour market. The SFAO observed that the image of vocational training suffers in comparison with that of university education. The Confederation should determine, in collaboration with the various stakeholders, whether additional measures could be taken to remedy this situation.

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