

Low skilled work in change

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Abstract:

This paper shows the most essential results of the study “Low skilled work in change”, that was dedicated to the subject of unskilled and low skilled work. There is described a segment ranging from simple activities to sophisticated activities at the level of skilled work. The focus will be on the transformation that this work has undergone until now, and which it will experience in the future. Within the framework of the study there were executed case studies on concrete workplaces, interviews with operational experts and analyses of job advertisements and secondary data. The results show that there has been a transformation towards more flexible working patterns. The equation: unskilled work is a work without any particular qualification requirements no longer applies today.

1. Target group of the survey

The proportion of unskilled work in Germany is slowly but continually sinking, as it will continue to do in the future. But at the same time it can also be seen that this does not involve, although often generally assumed, a "dying out" of unskilled work in Germany. In the discussion involving vocational teaching, this segment (Figure 1) is usually omitted, thus omitting a not inconsiderable part of the workforce. The statement that one in three people in work are carrying out either unskilled work or low-skilled qualified activities comprehensively reflects the reality of our world of work (1).

A particularly problematic group in this segment are those people without vocational training. On the one hand their proportion among all working people, just in the years between 1991 and 2003, dropped from 18% to 13% and on the other hand this group is also confronted with a higher than average risk of unemployment. One out of four low-skilled workers are unemployed (2).

This should show the significance of the group of low-qualified workers, and also the urgent need to take measures to support those people. Furthermore it is problematic that precisely the low-skilled workers are the ones who receive the least attention and are given the least support within a company framework.

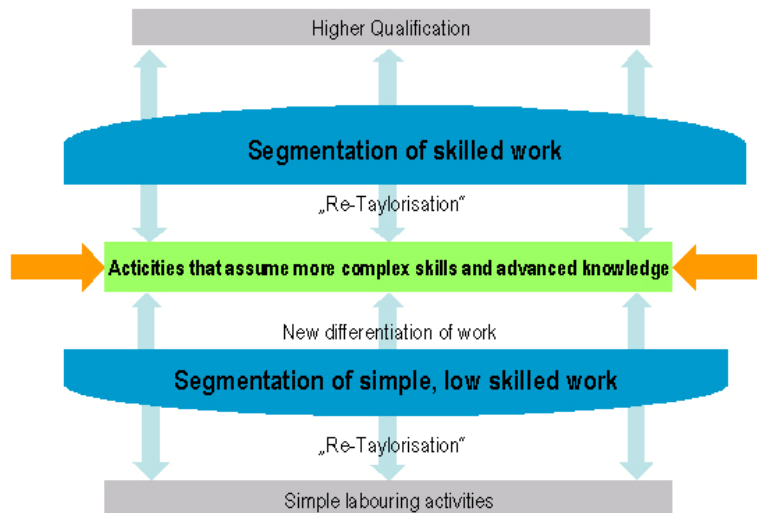


Figure 1: The Research Field between skilled and simple labouring activities

The FORSCHUNGSINSTITUT BETRIEBLICHE BILDUNG – RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR INCOMPANY TRAINING (f-bb) has the mission to examine the field beneath the skilled workers level. This segment has changed radically in recent years in terms of quality. The analysis was both a qualitative and a quantitative one.

2. The research network „FreQueNz“

„FreQueNz“ is an abbreviation for the German notation “early detection of qualification needs in a network”. This initiative is supported by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research. Various Institutions contribute with their project work to the network.

The research network’s aim is to find out new qualification needs both at the workplace as in specific branches or regions. This will make the permanent process of modernization in job training and in further education possible. Therefore instruments for early detection had to be created to be able to identify developments in an anticipatory manner. The determined requirements were supposed to be the basis for a branch specific grouping.

One basal result of the research work was that besides politics enterprises had to be considered as a target group of efforts. Continuous employment is only possible when employers can find adequately qualified employees. Those who hope that the problem of unemployment will be solved by the demographic change – corresponding calculations assume that by the year 2015 unemployment theoretically should have dissolved – do not consider the existing mismatch on the job market between the qualifications needed and the qualifications offered.

3. Data survey: focusing on concrete workplace activities

The proceeding of data ascertainment had the emphasis on the actual proximity to unskilled activities. In the context of case studies much time was spent on observing and analysing concrete unskilled activities which occur in companies. Here specialist interviews were not only

carried out with managing directors and personnel managers, but also with a shift manager since those are the ones who know the working environment very well and have an exclusive overview of activities and requirements. Furthermore - to round off the picture – an analysis of job adverts and a follow-up survey of those who have placed job adverts were conducted.

Another aspect was the distinction between cross-branch and branch-specific surveys. The project “Low skilled work in change” chose two branches for the branch-specific survey: the recycling and waste management sector and the metal and electrical industry. Both branches were chosen because they are characterised on the one hand by having a high proportion of semi-skilled and unskilled workers with a high degree of change in activities and on the other hand they are very innovative areas (3).

4. Low skilled work: before and in future

The following changes can be determined in concrete terms: the trend is moving away from isolated activities to a more complex situation and a complex work cycle. Where previously only a few repetitive hand movements were necessary, employees are now confronted with dynamic processes and frequently changing work procedures, difficult to plan. Even the low-qualified employee today assumes responsibility for his field of activity.



Figure 2: Service provision in complex structures – qualification trends in the field of low-skilled work

To illustrate this shift in qualification, the work cycles were treated under six different aspects (Figure 2). It can therefore be stated that there has been a transformation towards more flexible working patterns. Low-skilled work by semi-skilled and unskilled workers has become more varied in terms of performing simple operating activities, through the networking with other jobs in the process, although the individual manual actions have remained relatively simple (*operative process*). But they must be accomplished in different and changing environments, with different machines or tools, for the manufacture of varying products and services.

Business-related processes now demand company oriented thought processes and actions, even from low-qualified employees. The times are by and large now past in which it was sufficient just to concentrate on your own workplace.

Quality assurance today is in nearly all companies no longer an isolated process, performed by employees responsible just for this. Rather the implementation of checks and detection of errors is expected from employees for each individual manufacturing stage.

The work of semi-skilled and unskilled workers in companies is no longer assigned to a manager or skilled worker as assistance, but is closely integrated in the work environment with other work processes, which turns a unilateral or bilateral communication into a web of many actively used *information and communication processes*. Receiving detailed work instructions is a thing of the past, and even in the lower levels of a company, minds are focused in a process-oriented manner.

This in turn leads to further changes, such as the implementation of maintenance and minor repairs by the employee who operates the machine, and no longer by an external company or a separate maintenance department within the company (*technical process control*).

Even processes such as *environment management or work safety* are placed in the hands of the qualified employees. The concept of work safety as it is seen today is not a task to be delegated to some other person who has specialised knowledge of this, but rather the safe handling of dangers which can occur in the work environment is the responsibility of all those employed (4).



Figure 3: Qualification shift for semi-skilled and unskilled workers

As a result one statement can be clearly made. The equation: unskilled work is a work without any particular qualification requirements no longer applies today.

But what are the implications of this statement? What need for action results from it? From the point of view of labour-market policy, this means that programmes and measures must in future be better adjusted to the potential target group. In concrete terms this means that the potentially low-qualified of tomorrow, young people with few or no school qualifications, or young people with a background of migration who do not have full command of the language of the host country, must be catered for by suitable measures.

These measures include two-year professional training courses which also allow those school leavers who have little theoretical background to make a good start in their professional working lives.

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