

MULTINA - Internationalisation@ Home with Multinational Practice Enterprise



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Multinational Practice Enterprises

MULTINA Roundtable Summary

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Introduction:

The MULTINA roundtables have been organized by all the project partners in order to discuss the future competencies and skills needed to work in a multinational environment. The roundtables were held to guide the project consortium in the right direction of the Framework and Programme Model Outline for MULTINA and to make its internationalisation@home strategy as realistic as possible. The main aim was to provide insights as to which skills & competencies needed in a multinational environment and how these can be trained within the Practice Enterprise concept.

For the purposes of a holistic methodological approach, different target groups were asked for their insights, more specifically trainers, trainees and business stakeholders. In the mobility surveys the main target group were the trainees, for the roundtables, primarily trainers and stakeholders from educational institutions were chosen. In some countries real world business representatives were also included as they best understand the labour market needs and what they themselves need of their future employees. The participants of the roundtables were also asked as to which activities could be used to train these “global competencies” and multinational working skills within the Practice Enterprise.

Competencies and skills for job readiness in a multinational work environment

As to the skills and competencies needed to work in a multinational company, most of the trainers and business stakeholders mentioned the need to master foreign language competencies. For some of the countries, the mother tongue is spoken by only a small number of people and can be used in a limited way outside of the country. Due to this reason, it is crucial for the trainees to acquire and train foreign language skills early on and get used to communication in an international environment. The language most commonly used for international communication and in multinational companies is English.

Along with the language competencies, cross-cultural competencies and understanding the business etiquette from different countries were also mentioned as necessary elements and parts of being able to work in an international working environment. These all go hand in hand with being able to understand cultural differences and being sensitive to these and thus facilitating smooth cross-cultural interaction across different languages, cultures and making trainees aware of the diversity in the global labour market. These aspects could for example affect time expectation differences (being strict or more flexible with time etc.). All of these skills and competencies can better prepare trainees for the future world of work.

A lot of participants from all different countries mentioned the ability to be adaptable and flexible as one of the most important skills to be able to work in a multinational, international and global environment. These competencies have been especially on the forefront of the transformation of the way of work that took place during and after the Covid19 pandemic.

This not only refers to the adaptability and flexibility vis a vis the tasks being required from employees as the shift has changed from clear job profile to flexible and adaptable competency-based candidate profiles, but also in regards to the way of working. This means that now there are positions which are offered on a fully remote basis (full internationalisation@home in the work environment), just as there are some positions which require a blended way of working (both in person at the workplace and remotely from home office).

Participants and trainees should be prepared for these realities already at the point in time of the training and education path and research has shown that VET educational institutions are often behind in adapting to these developments. This aspect also opens a larger pool of opportunities to the potential candidates such as being able to apply to a job in a different country while residing in another.

The adaptability and flexibility also can lead to the next competency and skills mentioned which are the constant need to learn and develop oneself. The path is not ended when entering the labour market but with the rapid changes in communication and technology, the employees need to follow a continuous learning path to be able to keep up with the rapid changes. This involves the aspect of “curiosity” and being interested in what learning opportunities and new elements are out there.

A lot of the knowledge can be nowadays researched online so affinity to learn and test things out is an important piece of the puzzle. Employees who have no desire for self-improvement, self-development and continuous learning are at a much higher risk to be left behind as the working landscape is changing at a fast pace.

The most commonly mentioned skills in general were also in general “communication skills” overall. This is not to say specifically foreign language skills (which are seen as a first prerequisite to work in an international setting) but moreover the wholesome communication skills of an individual. This encompasses a multi-fold of soft skills that together create a good “communicator”. These are among others also negotiation skills and presentation skills which tie into one’s personal branding within the company structure.

Even with the rapid shift to digitalisation and remote work, employers mention that hard skills are possible to be acquired on the job whereas a good set of existing soft skills (communication being the most important one) is something that they are asking and needing from their future employees. The communication skills can also be separate into overall general communication and more specifically business communication.

Trainers mentioned that very often trainees are struggling with following certain rules of the business communication. These might differ from the way they interact with their peers on an everyday basis.

Among the skills, the trainers and business stakeholders did not omit to point out that apart from the different transversal skills are of course also the aptitude for digital skills.

After the Covid19 pandemic, the labour market and the world of business has undergone a sped-up process of digitalisation, in some sectors more than in others. Having some basic digital skills is not only crucial for job readiness in the labour market but most importantly, it has become an inherent part of everyday life.

As some products, services and offers are increasingly becoming digitised, so are also the expectations of new employees entering a multinational company. This is especially true as some of the teams are connected worldwide only across digital communication channels and collaborative tools. The digital skills could include for example organising online meetings on various video conferencing platforms and having advanced knowledge of these tools such as creating breakout rooms, sharing techniques etc.

Another important skill was the ability to know oneself and understanding one's weaknesses and strengths and also the opportunities for improvement. Some of the trainers and business stakeholders identified a key competitive advantage over other candidates as future employees are more self-aware and able to identify their gaps, needs for improvement and also able to use their strengths.

This is an important element where the Practice Enterprise can support trainees on their learning path and support with practice-based learning to prepare them for the future challenges and opportunities that await them.

Last but not least, confidence and motivation were mentioned as skills needed to succeed in the multinational work setting. Many of the VET trainees being trained in Practice Enterprises, do not have the confidence to speak in foreign languages, communicate with peers from other cultures and therefore little by little their self-confidence needs to be built up.

The trainers mentioned that the earlier they are slowly introduced to the international environment, the better but often it takes some time to get acquainted with the idea. This involves trainees stepping out of their comfort zones and this also then is something which happens throughout their career paths continuously. Secondly, many mentioned motivation being the driving force behind the desire to develop, learn and adapt to new realities, thus an indispensable element to succeed in the multinational working environment.

Overall, most trainers and business stakeholders agreed that flexible participants with transversal "global" skills and those who have a multinational perspective are the ones most likely to succeed in the increasingly international and multicultural working environment.

To be able to work in a multinational company, they need to possess the aptitude and keen interest in learning, need to be open minded and tolerant and should focus on teambuilding and finding a sense of belonging within the organisations. These can be often large and many of the employees may exclusively work remotely so it is important to cultivate a teambuilding and sense of belonging atmosphere.

Global competencies and skills trained in the Practice Enterprise

The next part of the roundtables was devoted to the topic of how these identified global competencies and skills for job readiness to work in a multinational environment could be trained in a Practice Enterprise. Approaches such as sharing best practices from successful entrepreneurs & managers was mentioned as a motivational way of sharing knowledge and real experience from the world of business. This is especially important as the labour market & world of business is quickly changing.

Trainers from Slovakia and Czech Republic mentioned the need to focus on presentation and communications skills and learn how to cope with stress from presenting to large audiences. According to them, Practice Enterprise trainees should be exposed to “presenting” as early as possible in the whole Practice Enterprise process and get used to getting out of their comfort zone.

The frequent presentations to their peers will give them the necessary practice to improve and will provide them with valuable and constructive feedback to grow and learn. Training these skills before entering the real world of business is the best practice-based learning path that is both realistic and experiential.

Trainers from Denmark mentioned language cafes and informal networking meetings as important to get trainees acquainted with their peers from different countries and cultures. These small opportunities to meet will allow them to test their foreign language competencies, will slowly introduce them to cross-cultural communication and will allow them to gradually gain confidence to take part in larger internationalisation@home training initiatives.

Trainers from Denmark also noted that a part of these networking events could be some training games (gamification of education) where the focus would be on acquiring skills and competencies in an informal setting.

An important point mentioned for the training of these global skills was the continuous collaboration with mentor companies and working together with business professionals. In this way the Practice Enterprise experience stays true to the real world of business experience. The rapidly changing business environment can then continuously shape the best PE experience and can train the future-proof skills and competencies.

Some trainees mentioned that it is sufficient to simply use the methodology of the Practice Enterprises in order to constantly update all the acquired competencies and to combine the practice-based learning which gives trainees the tools necessary to be successful in the real world of business.

This is especially true as the PE concept combines practical tasks with theoretical knowledge and helps with career guidance which is often missing in other parts of the education. It focuses on finding out what one enjoys to do and is good at and can guide the trainees into the right direction.

In Italy, the trainers and the business stakeholder mentioned the importance of understanding the PE processes and understanding the country identity of the different multinational Practice Enterprise departments. For these purposes, they highlighted the importance of common tools for reporting, collaborating, monitoring and sharing. All of these tools and processes allow trainees to train realistic skills that will surely be needed in a multinational company setting.

Trainers and business stakeholders in Italy also mentioned that a key focus already in the Practice Enterprise should be on managing the well-being of employees (trainees) and taking care of their stress management mechanisms and needs. Moreover, an increasing focus should also be put on diversity and inclusion training in the Practice Enterprises as this will best prepare trainees for working with colleagues from different cultures, religions and parts of the world.

This is especially relevant as the topic of diversity and inclusion is becoming an ever-present theme and due to greater mobility and an increasingly international labour market, companies are establishing new positions and departments to deal with this phenomenon.

Trainers from France mentioned the possibility to aim certain elements of the Practice Enterprise process or to do certain training focuses within the Practice Enterprise on foreign language learning. In some countries, there are even short or mid-term foreign language PE integrated language courses (e.g. Switzerland).

In this way, trainees learn the language in a realistic work environment and actively practice them in a formal business setting with a concrete outcome. Another concrete way to increase international exposure, exchanges and foreign language learning are targeted bilateral connections between Practice Enterprises from different countries where trainees can test their pitching skills and can get used to presenting to peers from other countries.

Multinational training activities ideas for the Practice Enterprise

When asking the trainers about the possible multinational activities by which global competencies could be trained within the Practice Enterprise, there were differing answers but all of them could be used within the MULTINA program model. Among these were for example the mentioned “traditional understanding” of the multinational Practice Enterprise model in which there is one mother company and branches in other countries.

Another realization of the multinational Practice Enterprise are different departments in different countries. To enable a best learning experience, these branches or departments should have a set timetable at the same time - time and date when the employees can communicate with one another in a synchronous environment. Of course, there could also be many asynchronous collaborative learning training activities within this framework.

The trainers in Slovakia believe that the methodology is very flexible and can be adapted to the needs of the respective multinational Practice Enterprise so that trainees feel they can progress at their own pace and get the most of their experience on an individualised learning pathway of work-based education.

The multinational aspect of company culture is an ever more common element in the way of working and this should also be represented in the Practice Enterprise concept. The economies and companies are no longer isolated and functioning only nationally but the reality is an ever growing interconnectedness and international contacts, teams and organisations.

Working together with mentor companies from multinational backgrounds according to trainers from many of the countries is the key to being more realistic. The constant exchange with real world business representatives can lead to the decrease of the future employees skills mismatch and can also ensure that the training environment focuses on all of the relevant skills and competencies needed to work in a multinational business environment.

Trainers from Denmark mentioned multinational training activities could start with smaller international encounters - trading events, networking contacts, trying out international reaching out to other PEs. These could be in the form of specific language courses, online trading event opportunities, company representation, and pitching products to other international enterprises. By starting on a small scale, trainees could gain more confidence and eventually also try to take part in larger multinational training initiatives.

Trainers and business stakeholders in Italy mentioned that the most efficient multinational training activities would be trying out all different formats and types. They believe that the different activities and models could train different skills and competencies. Trying out as many formats as possible can furthermore only enhance and improve trainee's adaptability and flexibility. These could also be tested out in blended mode, that is both online and in person activities at the same time as both have their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities.

The trainers in France mentioned multinational training activities such as marketing campaigns in foreign languages or online sales pitches at international Trade Fairs. These activities could be very efficient as they also are highly motivating for trainees to participate in. Another idea of the trainers from France would be the organisation of regional meetings or Trade Fairs – e.g. with neighbouring countries.

This can test the activities on a smaller scale and can then grow out into larger international initiatives. Especially for some participants with great disadvantages (be it social, financial or physical), these internationalisation@home and virtual opportunities can be of a tremendous importance.