

The return has to be right!?

Benefits of work-based basic skills (WBBS)

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Introduction

A few years ago, a work-based basic skills (WBBS) event titled "The return must be right!" One thing is clear: If you want companies that are places of work to become places of learning for their simple workforce, it must be clear from the beginning that "useful learning" is offered – for the employees and for the company. What this usefulness looks like is reported in this article. In a benefit evaluation we let participating employees, management as well as supervisors and trainers of work-based basic skills (WBBS) have had their say. It also becomes clear what makes WBBS offerings useful for learning – and it's more than a return!

1. What are we talking about: Work-based basic skills

WBBS is in "an [...] educational theory tradition and is an educational concept that includes comprehensive educational goals such as reflectivity, autonomy and identity. Therefore, WBBS is more than the imparting of reading, writing and arithmetic." (Klein / Reutter / Schwarz, 2017)

- WBBS addresses the question of what is the least people should know and should be able to do to successfully participate in the world of work.
- WBBS provides learning opportunities, especially for those with low formal qualifications.
- The contents of the learning fields for WBBS are derived from the "real" action requirements at the various workplaces.
- WBBS is therefore geared towards concrete work requirements and needs of the company and its employees.
- A WBBS training usually takes place close to the workplace and / or alongside work.
- Companies see WBBS in the context of optimizing work processes, error reduction, QM, effectiveness and efficiency in work organization.

2. Presenting the benefits of WBBS: a must?

Illustrating the benefits may be rather unusual for course instructors and lecturers in adult education, since education is useful in itself and needs no further justification. From education-idealistic point of view, certain trainers might consider benefit a rather "grubby category". However, the use of learning is mandatory for the operational thinking and action logic. The experiences gained during 10 years of work-based basic skills training show that the identification of benefit expectations and an evaluation of benefit in this field are and must be an indispensable part of the work of the WBBS trainers. This is due to the fact that WBBS has two

customers and addressees: the employees and the company or those responsible for their operations.

The experiences that can be derived from the practices show:

- An **individual and a company benefit** must be clearly recognizable (see Klein / Reutter 2014).
- At the **employee level** WBBS expands workplace competencies, job satisfaction, employability and the ability to move flexibly in the labor market.
- From an **entrepreneurial perspective**, investment is made in maintaining and expanding the employability and skills of the staff in order to secure the development and competitiveness of the company.
- Corporate management, supervisors or HR professionals will only consider WBBS a meaningful undertaking if the individual benefit to the employee(s) can also be expected to result in an operational benefit that is **clearly describable and identifiable**. The acceptance of WBBS as training on the job for the simple workforce is based on the fact that the return is right – for the company (which also has expenses for it) and for the employees as participants.

This raises the interesting question of whether the articulated needs and benefit expectations of employees are congruent or contradictory with those of the company representatives. In any case it is about the fact that WBBS trainers come across different perspectives, interests and ideas which they must take into account during the planning of the training.

3. Evaluation of the benefits of WBBS

Against this background, there is a benefit evaluation of the Gruwe project (www.gruwe-nrw.de) which we conducted based on the evaluation documents provided by the WBBS trainers. These are reflexive, protocol-related documents of the trainers and questionnaires that evaluate the benefits achieved following a WBBS training from the perspective of company representatives (management, supervisors, personnel managers), employees and WBBS trainers. We were interested in a review and a more specific description of the outlined experience.

Gruwe traced the following questions during the benefit evaluation:

- How can the benefits of WBBS training be described from the perspective of managers and executives, participants in training (employees) and trainers?
- At which levels of the system of work and employment is the benefit visible in which way?

- Can we identify similarities and differences with regard to the benefits of WBBS training from different perspectives (managers, employees, trainers)?

4. What was confirmed, what was surprising?

As expected, Gruwe's benefit evaluation shows that companies especially focus on the operational benefits arising from the expansion of their employees' skills as a result of WBBS training. Likewise, the expectation that employees describe benefits primarily on a subjective level is confirmed. However, it also turns out that employees see their personal benefit (usually) with regard to their job, as most of the training takes place in the work environment and is geared towards specific work requirements. Meanwhile, trainers consider and evaluate both levels of benefit: the company level and the employee level. Overall, there is a double benefit on both levels: the increasing satisfaction of the employees has positive consequences for the productivity.

Especially trainers and participants describe the multifaceted benefits of WBBS for the employees' personality development, which goes beyond the teaching of basic technical skills, in a surprisingly consistent manner. Respondents say that they have become more self-confident and independent. From the point of view of these groups of actors, the changed attitude towards learning also proves to be significant. It shows that the positive learning experiences within WBBS can help to increase the readiness for lifelong learning. At the same time, this refutes the persistent assumption that low-skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers are resistant to further education.

Concerning the level of the companies benefit, all three stakeholder groups agree that WBBS training (by means of workflow optimization) contributes to an increased productivity and an improved working environment. Remarkably often in this context, the release of employees is discussed, which takes place due to the fact that the training participants' expansion of competences reduces the necessary amount of questions to colleagues.

It is also interesting to see how WBBS trainings can have an impact on the companies themselves and can trigger changes in processes and organization. Furthermore, an unexpected effect on supervisors can be shown. For example, executives say they have a more sensitive attitude towards employees as a result of their participation in WBBS. All in all, WBBS has a positive effect on the communication within a company and on interpersonal relationships. WBBS also provides a valuable opportunity for leaders to show their appreciation to the employees.

It turns out that WBBS has many surprising and unexpected effects on companies and employees, and that it provides benefits in small matters and in large ones, even in cases they would not have been initially expected. Even though the expected benefits of the involved

actors are primarily directed inwards, the respondents' statements reveal a surprising number of overlaps and unintended consequences. This finding underlines the complexity of the WBBS approach, which is – and must be – different in every business, as each training is geared to the needs of the target company and its employees. For WBBS to be effective, however, there are other factors that are considered below.

5. Effect promoting factors

On an empirical level, answering the question of the factors that enhance the effectiveness of work-based basic skills training is closely linked to the question of how it benefits individual actors. Which aspects are judged by the actors to be effective depends on 1. what impact (benefit category), 2. on whom (benefit level) and 3. from which perspective (three actor groups) is considered.

However, the **perspective of companies** in terms of impact-enhancing aspects can only be presented indirectly since superiors and HR departments are not involved in the training measures themselves and can therefore only evaluate them indirectly. Their assessment is based on a derivation of possible favorable factors based on the basically observable effect of WBBS on the participants and the workflow. In addition, they determine the success of WBBS training in regard to the person of the trainer. For example, in the feedback from the company managements – regardless of whether they are warehouse logistics, hairdressing or nursing care providers – it becomes clear: "Trainer B. was able to respond to all participants even with different levels of knowledge and interests." "We were very satisfied with Mrs. R." as well as with the communication with her and the employees. Organizational framework conditions of WBBS are also named as impact promoting factors. "Good and timely implementation of the content was possible." The assessment of what exactly promotes the learning progress in detail, however, remains reserved to the training participants themselves: the employees who were interviewed in the context of the underlying benefit evaluation.

While companies primarily focus on the benefits of WBBS on the company level, **employees** assess it primarily in terms of subjective considerations. Therefore, they attribute an effect of WBBS to a needs-based orientation on the needs of employees, as individuals with individual (learning) biography as well as employees, with concrete learning goals for daily work. In particular, didactic aspects of the mediation of learning contents, such as application orientation, learning atmosphere, an individual selection of materials, the expertise of the trainer and organizational framework are important to them.

From the **perspective of the trainers**, the attitude of all participants towards the training, the flexibility of WBBS, the communication between trainers and enterprise, the experience of self-efficacy for employees, a (financial) support as an incentive for the companies, the com-

position resp. the cohesion of the learning group, the consideration of individual (biographical) factors of the participants as well as the trust of the employees in them as trainers are counted to the factors that can be promote on work-based basic skills. Accordingly, one can make a fundamental distinction between factors which have a positive effect on content / design aspects (that is, on a need-based design of training situations) and on the implementation of training (in particular aspects of communication and organization). Both are discussed in more detail below.

5.1 Effect promoting factors: Demand-oriented design of the training situations and training contents

The tailor-made offer which distinguishes WBBS from other learning formats (especially from the well-known image of school) is referred to by the employees as a central cause of their learning success. The previous experience of many low-skilled people with educational institutions is often negative. Retrospectively, the institution "school" is often associated with control and constraint, feedback on one's own performance was disappointing, the benefits of what was learned remained uncertain. Often, a job is started with the hope to never have to learn again, which eventually turns out to be wrong. Therefore, WBBS trainers often find themselves in need to prove the usefulness of their offer first, in order to distance themselves from the institution school. They must therefore show the employees that "learning can also be done differently". At the same time, however, they must ensure that the agreed learning objectives of the company are implemented. The design of the training is perceived by the participants to be particularly conducive to learning (and considered by the trainers to be successful) if it contrasts distinctly from the general picture of school instruction. The possibility of deviating from the rigid model of frontal teaching and instead being able to use discussions in the learning group on work topics or playful learning models is therefore perceived as positive. In particular, the trainers emphasize the central importance of the positive mood in the group of learners in the surveys. But the "atmosphere" is also important for participants. A trainer adds: "The teaching of learning content was [...] carried out with practical exercises. This resulted in the participants having a good reception of the learning material. Basically, the positive attitude of the participants and their interest in the learning content made the seminar so successful. [...] The loose discussion group and the avoidance of frontal teaching provided space for spontaneous contributions." On the contrary, the trainers disagree on the relevance of group homogeneity or the handling of heterogeneity, which is discussed under point 6.

Moreover, the orientation of the exercises on the requirements of daily work and the "use of company files and materials (known content)" highlight the usefulness and direct applicability of what has been learned. The application in the workplace makes learning achievements di-

rectly visible and at the same time trains the new knowledge and skills. This learning transfer and the interconnectedness with the daily work are identified by trainers as a central factor in promoting work-based basic skills training, as well as the opportunity to relearn "learning" by means of positive experiences. WBBS is also used, for example, to lose "[the] fear of dealing with MS Office-programs. He works with industry software but he's afraid of Word and Excel [...]."

The self-concept of WBBS also includes the consideration of individual characteristics and interests of employees, for example during the course of an individual coaching. One coach writes: "The progress in both the professional and especially in the personal area could only be achieved during individual coaching. A crying man, e.g. –that would not have been possible in a group." Trainers can also react to extraordinary needs and living conditions, which may derive, for example, from a specific biography or physical / psychological factors. WBBS as a way of personnel development emphasizes a company in conversation with the trainer. "[The] company wants to win the participant as an apprentice, but knows that he is currently not 'compatible' for the dual system – hopes to get further support which cannot be provided during the ongoing business operation." Taking the employees' motivation for participation into consideration is also regarded as effect promoting factor. "The learning effect of this learning group also depends [...] on the aspired length of the stay in Germany (family still at home or already in Germany)."

5.2 Effect promoting factors: communication / organization / trust

In addition, unskilled and semi-skilled workers are, of course, aware that companies are primarily places of work and not learning places and that their employment conditions are often precarious. As a result of their experience, they often tend to cover up their deficits instead of asking for help. "Participant does not want colleagues / employers to know about his reading difficulties." The study shows examples such as the strategy of asking colleagues or guessing words. "He recognizes words as PICTURES, which he randomly complements in an imaginative manner. He has a very distinct visual memory which still does not keep him from extending words in the wrong way. Therefore the deficiency has not been noticed so far [...]. "

Nevertheless, working processes can be disrupted by knowledge deficits – and colleagues may be overburdened by frequent questions. Many low-skilled people believe (not always without good reason) that the management is rather inclined to hire more qualified employees instead of investing in existing staff. Therefore, it is proven that employees shy away from asking supervisors anything which could reveal their "deficiencies". One goal of WBBS therefore also is empower people to "[...] address the supervisor to eliminate uncertainties and have the courage to ask questions." Participating in basic skills training offers is therefore initially associated with a risky "outing" which makes the participants "vulnerable".

As a result, WBBS trainers at all levels need to continuously work on trust-building and take on the role of mediator between companies and employees. Employees should not see trainers as "spies" of the management who check their educational status, but as service providers and supporters. In this respect, trust also represents an important effect promoting factor in the work of the WBBS trainers. "Mr. D. has developed confidence and talks about things which concern his professional and family matters. This basis of trust is a very good starting point for successful learning." Thus, learning needs may be made visible, which the employees would have been afraid to mention before." After the ice was broken and a basis of trust could be built up, many topics were addressed that were not considered at the beginning of the project."

If the trainers succeed in winning the trust of the participants, the mediation between them and their supervisors will be facilitated. In an ideal case, after completing the training, a direct dialogue between employees and supervisors would be possible, so that employees could address their learning needs without fear of consequences. Trust work can thus promote the effectiveness of WBBS in terms of increased employee identification with the company and an improved working environment. Likewise, trainers need to win the trust of the company representative, as their work gives them insight into the business operations.

Overall, from the point of view of the trainers, a high level of commitment on behalf of the employees and companies and from the point of view of all actors, good general communication and organizational framework conditions are regarded as effect promoting factors. "It was very good that there was a specific contact person [in the company] for the measure. This is important for the participants and coaches. This way, no time is lost, problems can be solved quickly and overcome." "After the one-on-one interviews, Mrs. W. [supervisor] and I had a clarifying conversation [...]. That turned out to be very positive." This close and continuous cooperation between the coaches and the companies not only enables the tailor-made orientation of the learning content at the beginning of the training measures, but also ensures that they are up-to-date in a constantly changing world of work and, in some cases, fast-moving industries. "The speed in which educational content become obsolete is likely to be higher the more closely it is tied to the practice of work performances." (Mertens, 1977, p.99) WBBS therefore has the great advantage of being directly "at the source". At the same time, work-based basic skills also impart higher education goals that offer participants the opportunity to qualify and thus emancipate themselves. This is particularly evident in the benefit categories "learning empowerment" and "personality development" in the evaluation.

6. Discussion of the results

However, this presentation should in no way convey the impression of absolute unity of the actors with regard to their assessments. There are also different understandings and experiences within the individual actor groups, which factors inhibit one another and which ones

have a positive effect on work-based basic skills. This should be illustrated by the example of the "debate about homogeneity".

The core of this debate is the theoretical question of the "correct" way for teachers to deal with the heterogeneity of learners (in the context of education and teaching). This requires a negotiation of their expectations with the practical requirements, which is usually achieved through a form of differentiation of the learner groups. "In the context of school, there is often a high heterogeneity in learning groups, which coincides with a strong expectation of homogeneity of teachers. The important thing here is the right balance between equality and difference. However, the question how equality and difference can best be combined with each other has hardly been researched so far." (See Scheunpflug, 2008, quoted in Aschemann, 2011, p.3) Especially in the field of adult education, this question seems pressing and must therefore be answered while dealing with the learners on a daily basis.

The results of the underlying benefit evaluation confirm the common distinction between two models of differentiation which the trainers consider useful for the learning progress. For example, some trainers favor a common learning group whose participants enrich their learning experiences with the heterogeneity of the group. In this case, the trainer must respond to the different requirements and needs of all participants within a course. This form of differentiation allows "[...] individualization because it deliberately uses the differences for didactic action with the aim of optimizing the chances of successful learning for every learner. It knows many ways and is preconditionally." (Klein, 2016, p. 1) According to the interviewed trainers, there is a potential chance that participants will benefit from each other – and the risk that they will hinder each other. Klafki and Stoecker's concept of "internal differentiation" accordingly [...] refers to "all those forms of differentiation that are made *within* a common teaching group [...]" (Klafki / Stoecker, 1991, p. 173, emphasis in orig.; cited by Demmig, 2003, p.19)

In contrast, "external differentiation" represents the attempt to form groups as homogeneous (small) as possible by means of group division (see Kaufmann 2007, also see Aschemann, 2011, p.2). This may increase the need for human, time and spatial resources.

At the same time, on the empirical level, the question of the characteristics of the participants arises, on the basis of which a differentiation is to be made. In the underlying study, the aspects of nationality, language, field of work / department and, in particular, learning status emerge. Respondent WBBS coaches who consider the second model to be more useful argue (with regard to "level of education or learning status" of the participants as a differentiating feature, which is also referred to as "level differentiation" (see Aschemann, 2011, p. 5, see also Scholz, 2007)) that "inferior" and "better" participants tend to "compare [...] themselves with each other", according to a trainer in a computer training. Therefore, "beginners and advanced [...] have to be separated right from the start [...]" "[...] During the first two days, I alternately put more experienced and inexperienced ones side by side or divided them into

two groups. In the first setting, the experienced participants were able to pass on their knowledge and thus deepen their knowledge. However, they were usually quite impatient and wanted to help the others [...] as fast as possible [...], so that the inexperienced ones did not have such a good feeling of learning. [...] When I [separated] the participants [...], they were better able to learn at their own pace in both groups." Some trainers therefore consider "dividing groups into different levels" beneficial (says a trainer of a language course).

The idea of testing the current level of performance of the participants at the beginning of a training session and making this review the basis of external differentiation is critically opposed by the supporters of the internal differentiation model.

Their counterargument is based on a central quality feature of WBBS. Each trainer should carry the message into the group: "I pick up everyone, where he is." However, this does not mean that an initial diagnosis of the participants cannot also be the basis of a meaningful internal differentiation or even must be (see Aschemann, 2011, p .4, see also Scholz, 2007). Even trainers who were involved in a training session within the same course sometimes came to different results concerning this matter, as the example of the IT course quoted above shows. While the first trainer prefers the model of "outer differentiation" in practice, her colleague supports the internal differentiation model after testing both models. "In addition, the seminar was designed in a way that the participants also helped each other. This has had a positive effect for the helpers as well as for those who were helped by their colleagues."

There is also disagreement concerning the question of group differentiation in regard to other aspects. While some coaches [...] consider "small learning groups, [a] homogeneous group composition" as well as "groups [...] with the same nationality [with] similar field of work" or "same language" as beneficial for learning, ("The two new participants integrated well into the group, the common nationality significantly facilitated resp. intensified the work [...]."), others argue that the "[...] learning progress in the group [was promoted] by means of the lively exchange with each other. The participants partly come from different divisions. By means of the WBBS training they got insights into other departments and their operations, could now understand [what] the further processing of the products looks like [...]. "

The results of the evaluation can be interpreted by saying that the question of the "right" way of dealing with heterogeneity cannot be answered on a theoretical level. Nevertheless, this debate should be continued in order to not leave teachers alone with their challenges and problems and to initiate further research.

7. Outlook

In Germany, the growing shortage of skilled workers is a fundamental problem for more and more industries. Currently, there is no indication that this trend is reversing. Despite this forecast, many companies do not exhaust an important workforce resource. Neglecting the low-skilled workforce by the company's personnel development policies could turn out to be a waste of resources in the future, if one interprets it as a missed investment in the endogenous potential of companies. However, work-based basic skills training can only be considered a worthwhile investment and integrated into in-company training opportunities if companies realize that an appropriate promotion of low-skilled workers not only benefits for them but also the company. "The return must be right – for the company, the institution which places the order as well as for the learners." (Klein / Zisenis, 2010, p.2)

The benefit evaluation of the Gruwe project proves that work-based basic skill training has an effect on the level of companies and employees, so that the return is actually right. To adjust, it should be noted that the return of the investment is right for the companies, because investing in WBBS pays off as it is proven that economically relevant changes also take effect. However, this statement should not encourage "the economization of education and training" (Klein / Zisenis, 2010, p.1), but rather take the perspective of those participants into account who do not regard education as an end in itself but as a means to an end (possibly due to economic considerations).

For employees, on the other hand, less "returns related" effects come into play, because effects of education which serve the personal growth and enrichment, social behavior or participation in society, but also the assurance of occupational existence (see Mertens, 1977, P.103) can be difficult to quantify. However, this knowledge must also reach the executive floors, the HR departments and the employees themselves. The partly very different use expectations of the actors complicate this educational work.

By contrast, a more uniform assessment can be found concerning the questioning of the participants when it comes to naming the factors that enhance the effectiveness of WBBS. In particular, all measures which were geared towards the participant and his learning needs at the workplace turned out to be beneficial. This is the result of the aspiration of work-based basic skills training to pick up each participant "where he / she stands". As indisputable as this point is in theory, the heterogeneity of the target group makes its implementation just as difficult. In the end every trainer has to decide for himself/herself which is the best way for him/her to reach each participant. However, it clearly turns out that the success of WBBS highly depends on this decision as well as on the fact that the decisions to implement the training are supported by the companies and their employees. It remains a fact that any benefit only occurs if the target group of WBBS training is reached. This is a problem which has to be solved on a structural level rather than on an individual one.

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