

Introduction

The concept of labour competence emerged in the 1980s in certain industrialized countries, particularly in those which were finding it difficult to link the training system to the needs of manufacturing industry. The problems experienced in these countries were not only quantitative; in fact they were mainly qualitative. The traditional systems of education and training did not correspond to the times. The response was the notion of labour competence, which takes an integral view of training, designing programmes to connect the world of work and society in general with the world of education and training.

The same problems also arise in developing countries, where they are probably more serious and persistent, and where fewer resources are available for education. In these countries a system of labour competence would appear to be an attractive way of moving training and education in a direction that will achieve a better balance between the needs of individuals, firms and society in general.

Before presenting it as a possible solution to the problems and challenges that developing countries, particularly in Latin America, face in terms of training, it is worth asking how labour competence is linked to world trends in competitiveness, productivity and innovation, as well as to workers' expectations at enterprise level. Other fundamental questions are: what methodological and institutional models of competence are already being applied and what are their respective advantages and disadvantages?

Without pretending to an exhaustive analysis of the subject nor the presentation of definite conclusions, the aim of the present study is to contribute to the debate by commenting on the characteristics of

labour competence and evaluating its effect on the labour market.

The first chapter examines the internal labour market of the firm, and the second considers whether labour competence could be an answer to challenges in the external labour market.

Labour competence is not a unique model, but covers a variety of interpretations and approximations, with their implications for the social partners in production. Chapter 3 analyses the different methodological trends with respect to labour competence and their advantages and disadvantages. The final chapter discusses institutional models which are currently practised in various countries, commenting on their advantages and disadvantages. In the conclusion, the critical factors identified throughout the study are recapitulated.

Many of the proposals set forth have their origin in meetings organized by the Mexican Council for Standardization and Certification of Labour Competence (CONOCER), as well as in discussions with personnel in the Department of Training and Productivity of the Mexican Labour and Social Security Ministry, especially in the Integral Quality and Modernization Programme (CIMO). Most of the important bibliographical references and quotations come from these institutions, from the Training Policies and Systems Branch of the ILO and from Cinterfor. Cinterfor also contributed some of the content and provided editorial assistance.

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