

## 'Concrete assistance' from EU needed to address ICT skills gap

Written by Thomas Händel on 30 March 2015 in Opinion  
Opinion

The EU must incentivise businesses to invest in their workforces, writes Thomas Händel.



Despite high unemployment in Europe, paradoxically many vacancies in the information and communication technologies (ICT) sector remain unfilled. Companies in all industries are desperately seeking talented ICT experts, not only traditional computer scientists, but also staff who have the necessary knowledge and skills to use modern technology in their daily jobs.

About half of Europeans use the internet on a daily basis. Consumers, service providers, the general public, the education sector, political life, culture and society are increasingly influenced by digital information processes and ICT skills are gaining importance in a growing number of jobs. However, 30 per cent of EU citizens never use the internet. Those without the prerequisite knowledge and skills to actively participate in the 'online world' risk not being fully integrated in modern society. At the same time, the use of analogue services and forms of communication is now associated with higher costs for consumers.

"Eures - the European jobs portal - should be an important partner in helping find jobs in the ICT sector across Europe"

So what can the EU do to help the unemployed and current students to get ICT jobs? What can the EU do to improve ICT skills among workers? How can we address the skills gap between internet users and non-users?

At first glance it would seem tempting to quickly accommodate the unemployed in the ICT industry. However, this cannot be the only solution to the problem. The European digital jobs market could indeed quickly become saturated in the short term, but many of the unemployed people from Europe's crisis-ridden southern countries, such as Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Portugal, Italy and Spain, do not have to have the necessary and applicable skills for this evolving industry.

The EU also has no authority over the education policy of member states and therefore cannot dictate the insertion of ICT into the curriculums of schools and universities. At present, the EU and the parliament can only make recommendations and ultimately encourage them to better equip young people and students with ICT skills.

Under the slogan 'lifelong learning' more training could be offered in the ICT sector within the framework of the EU's Erasmus+ programme. More money urgently needs to be invested in this area and Erasmus+ can be considered as a means of tackling the high levels of youth unemployment in Europe. To date, only 3500 educational institutions and companies support the building of knowledge partnerships and alliances of industry-specific skills through Erasmus+ to promote employability, innovation and entrepreneurship. Here, the potential is far from exhausted.

Specifically, companies should be encouraged to offer further education - especially for young people - where they acquire the necessary knowledge to meet the constantly shifting requirements. Companies with vacancies in the ICT sector would thus actively participate in training the workforce they need. Against this background the existing grand coalition for digital jobs initiative is to be welcomed.

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In future, Eures - the European jobs portal - should be an important partner in helping find jobs in the ICT sector across Europe. A precondition is that the agency is finally recognised as a fundamental instrument used throughout the EU. The institutions are already working on improvements. Most people today already look for jobs and training opportunities on internet job exchanges. Therefore, we should connect Eures with private national and European online jobs portals and develop a central public jobs exchange in the medium term.

Businesses must also be given incentives by the EU and member states to retrain their current employees in the ICT sector. Due to rapid technological developments someone who was hired 10 years ago may no longer have the most up to date knowledge. Companies should therefore invest in their own future.

A focus on a methodological transfer of knowledge is crucial for the organisation of all support programmes for more basic IT knowledge and modern user skills. Support programmes that only train for the latest needs of entrepreneurial development rapidly become obsolete. However, support programmes offering structural basic knowledge from programming and database design are required

and must be further developed in future.

A considerable advantage of jobs in ICT is also that they can frequently be done from anywhere and employees are not required to move or emigrate. Above all they offer an opportunity to achieve a healthy work-life balance. However, full-time employment, instead of temporary contracts or freelance work, social security and poverty-proof predictable income are absolutely necessary to motivate young people to consider this career path at all. Jobs in the ICT sector must also be made more attractive.

Finally, the digital jobs market must be understood as an opportunity for all. It is estimated that by 2020 over 825,000 jobs in the ICT sector will be vacant. If the European Union offers no concrete assistance or places that correspond to company demands and member states' jobs markets risk positions being transferred to non-member countries. If this were to happen, Europe would lose out.

## About the author

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