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Wanted: training!

Office worker, baker, cook, decorator, gardener, florist, you name it. For both boys and girls, the Swiss apprentice system recognises a good 250 professions. But even so – or perhaps because of that very fact – it has

Ilaria Bignasci

not been spared the economic crisis. In the last ten years the number of young people taking up an apprenticeship has fallen from 190,000 to about 150,000. Although the situation has stabilised since 1993, many young people are still having problems finding a training position. Job market specialists have drawn the obvious conclusion from this: the apprenticeship market needs reform.

but it did not put in doubt the necessity for reform.

Need for change recognised

There can of course be no question of dismantling a system which for decades has played a central part in the vocational training of young people and has been imitated by countries like Germany and Austria. The aim must be to take immediate measures at a number of neuralgic points in the system and at the same time take in hand the question of more wide-ranging reform.

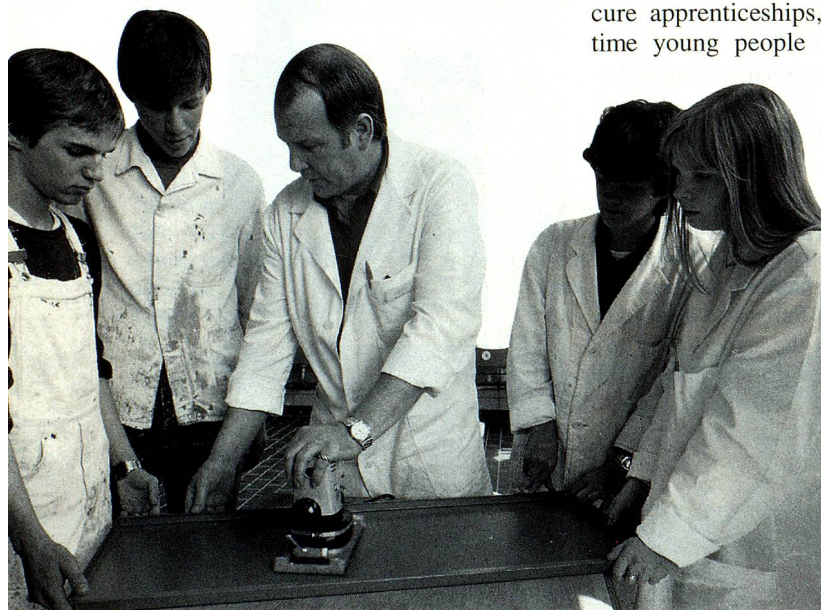
It is obvious that the situation differs according to region, economic branch and even particular business. Also, responsibility can be attributed only in part to the economic crisis. Politicians are jumping into the ring in a fight to secure apprenticeships, and at the same time young people are undergoing a

ships with bakers and butchers, nor in the field of medical care. The graphics branch and the watch-making industry also provide good possibilities at the moment. But it is true of course, as the proverb says, that "one swallow does not make a summer". And since the vocational training system is of vital concern in the medium term for Switzerland as a business location, the government does intend to put forward a draft revision of the law next year. But in the best possible case the adjustments contained in it will not come into effect until near the end of the present parliament.

Training is no place to cut costs

However, there is no point in waiting until the long legislative procedure has run its course before creating new apprenticeships. This is why appeals to the sense of responsibility of Swiss firms have come from every conceivable corner of the political scene. Businesses often put cost-saving before training apprentices, who have to spend two days a week away from their jobs at trade school. They prefer to employ qualified staff who have been trained by other firms – which may certainly be considered an irresponsible attitude to the economy and society as a whole. So it is by no means surprising that voices are being raised in favour of taxing all such "profiteers" and using the proceeds to help companies which are prepared to train apprentices. Another proposal would be to reward firms willing to train young people with tax breaks.

Quite apart from such ideas, however, the apprentice system must be adapted to the changed requirements of the economy. For example it would be a good thing to shorten the long list of professions to enable less specialised base training to be carried out – since too much specialisation limits the opportunities of young people when it finally comes to getting a job. But, over and above all this, the most important thing is to raise the status of vocational training, which – quite unjustly – is widely regarded as inferior to attending university. ■



Sound training of apprentices remains one of the main attractions of Switzerland as a business location. (Photo: Keystone)

Now that this problem has hit large Swiss-German cities like Zurich and Basle, big-time politics has finally recognised the deep-seated difficulties which the apprenticeship system is facing. During parliament's summer session the government was bombarded with urgent appeals on the matter. President of the Confederation and Economics Minister Jean-Pascal Delamuraz answered soothingly that the situation was "tense but not dramatic". This was a guarded assessment,

change in mentality. Very few of them still harbour an illusion of finding their dream job just a few steps from home. Most now realise quite well that they are unlikely to find a good training position if they are not prepared to be both flexible and mobile.

It is true that in both office work and in engineering the situation is at present difficult, but there are fields which offer perfectly attractive opportunities for those choosing a profession. For example, there is no lack of apprentice-