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'Soft skills' seen as key to employability

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Most business leaders believe that Europe's young people lack the so-called 'soft skills' that are considered essential by many employers. Closer links between business and schools are seen as a way to bridge this skills gap.

Background

In June 2010, EU leaders adopted the ['Europe 2020' strategy](#), which has the overall aim of creating jobs and promoting "smart, sustainable and inclusive growth".

The 2020 strategy is based on a series of targets, such as increasing the employment rate from 69% to 75%, and reducing the number of people living in poverty by 20 million.

The European Commission has launched seven flagship initiatives in the framework of the strategy. These include: ['Youth on the Move'](#), ['An Agenda for New Skills and Jobs'](#) and the ['European Platform against Poverty and Social Exclusion'](#).

Businesses are being encouraged to invest more energy and resources in building links with schools as a way of helping to broaden the horizons of Europe's young people and help them develop the skills they need to be successful in an increasingly competitive job market.

[A recent survey](#) of more than 500 business leaders from across Europe found that most (54%) think young people lack 'soft skills' such as confidence, teamwork, self-motivation, networking and presentation skills.

Meanwhile, more than two-thirds believe that their countries' education systems are either not at all successful or not very successful when it comes to developing financial and entrepreneurial skills amongst young people.

The survey was carried out by FreshMinds Research for JA-YE Europe, which is Europe's largest provider of entrepreneurship education programmes bringing together businesses, schools and young people.

Last year JA-YE Europe organised activities that involved more than three million students in 38 countries, but despite these efforts, the majority of young people in Europe are denied access to such programmes.

"According to the European Commission, only about 6% of the young people under the age of 18 in Europe have access to this kind of tripartite, partnership-based education," said Caroline Jenner, CEO of JA-YE Europe.

Expanding young people's horizons

Jenner believes that entrepreneurship education programmes can help to expand young people's horizons by making them aware of the opportunities that exist in the business world and the private sector in general.

However, she regrets that the impact of such schemes is currently limited because most young people are not being offered the chance to take part.

"We're reaching 3.2 million in the school system today, but there's much more to do," said Jenner, who set up her own private language school before getting involved in entrepreneurship education.

"We just don't have enough young people coming into the system to make enough impact, unless we really start investing in making the most of their potential," she adds.

Jenner was speaking at the European Business Summit in Brussels last week (18 May), during a session on 'human capital and the labour market'.

She told the audience of business leaders from across Europe that "young people are really part of the human capital pipeline, and that is the supply chain that we must invest in".

Businesses need to get actively involved

Jenner is convinced that entrepreneurship education programmes can make a positive contribution to the 'Europe 2020' strategy, and in particular the flagship initiatives 'Youth on the Move' and 'New Skills and Jobs' that are being implemented by the European Commission.

What is needed, she said, is for more businesses to get actively involved in supporting the kind of schemes being run by JA-YE, which stands for Junior Achievement – Young Enterprise.

According to Jenner, existing programmes have demonstrated that "this kind of engagement helps young people to be better prepared for the workplace".

"The more inputs they have, the better choices they will make," insisted Jenner.

"If those are inputs from business people and industry, so much the better, because you'll expand their opportunities and they'll make better educational choices."

'Uncool' industries offer interesting jobs

Jenner believes that young people should be given the chance to learn about different career possibilities "when they are still in school, when they're still thinking, when there still worried about what's going to be cool or what's not going to be cool".

Many industries that might be considered 'uncool' by young people offer a wide range of very interesting jobs, said Jenner. Most young people don't think about preparing themselves for such jobs, partly because they have never met people who do them.

"If you can expose the young people to those individuals, you will in fact change a lot of what young people decide to do," she claimed.

Jenner is convinced that increased knowledge of different industries and awareness of related career opportunities should lead to more young people choosing to study more 'difficult' subjects such as maths, science and technology.

At the same time, young people should be given opportunities to develop entrepreneurial skills and other kinds of skills that will help them to make a successful transition from full-time education to entering the labour market.

Jenner explained: "You need to have a lot of soft skills and coping skills, and I would say those are very entrepreneurial skills, where you have to deal with a problem in a creative way."

Positions

László Andor, the **EU commissioner for employment, social affairs and inclusion**, also addressed the European Business Summit in Brussels on 18 May.

"We have gone through a very tough recession and, despite the fact that unemployment has started to fall in recent months, we still have about 23 million people unemployed in the EU," said Andor.

"The lack of adequate skills is very much a major factor behind this picture. [It was] recognised a long time ago in the European Commission that this needs to be in the heart of our employment strategy," he continued, referring to the flagship initiative on 'New Skills and Jobs'.

The commissioner pointed out that across the whole of the EU, the unemployment rate for young people (18-24 years) is more than double the average unemployment rate.

"The question is how well can we connect the entry into the labour market with the performance of the school system. This is very important and this also needs to be encouraged: that businesses, stakeholders in the economy, play a role in developing the content of education, especially vocational training and also higher education in order to prepare a better match," he said.

Links

European Union

- European Commission: [Agenda for new skills and jobs \[DE\] \[FR\]](#)
- European Commission: [Youth on the Move](#)

Business & Industry

- [European Business Summit 2011](#)
- [JA-YE \(Junior Achievement - Young Enterprise\)](#)

NGOs and Think-Tanks

- Junior Achievement Young Enterprise: ["Closing the Gap Between Business and Education" survey report](#)

Press articles

- EurActiv Slovakia: [Kľúčom pre zamestnanosť nie sú odborné, ale osobné zručnosti](#)