

**Master thesis Arbeid, Organisatie en Management
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“E-assessment in SMEs: stimulation of investment in competence development by revealing learning needs”.

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Preface

In April 2005 I was ready to start this research for the Leonardo Da Vinci project “E-assessment of learning needs in SMEs”. This research has resulted into a very busy but also very valuable period. It was quite an experience to take part in such a large and interesting European project. Meeting the people that were involved in this project during a trip to Turin was of course a very pleasant experience. Now that the research has come to an end, there are some people who I would like to thank. First, I would like to thank Mary Dankbaar and Cris van Osch for all the help that they have given me during my time at Cinop and for their nice company during our stay in Turin. I would also like to thank Dr. Pruijt for his time and help with the writing of the thesis. Last, but not less important, I would like to thank Stefan for criticizing my writings and for his lasting faith in me.

Summary

In the present knowledge economy, the importance of continuous learning and competence development of employees in organizations increases. The larger organizations do their best to meet these demands and appear to be quite successful in doing so. However, many SMEs (Small- and Medium sized Enterprises) appear to pay no or little attention to skills- and knowledge development of their employees with the help of training or learning. The concept of “a life long learning” is standing high on the agenda of the European Commission. The project partners of the Leonardo Da Vinci project aim at empowering and improving the conditions for continuous learning in SMEs. One wants to try to reach this goal with the help of the creation of an e-assessment instrument, which will raise the awareness of SMEs and their employees on their learning needs. This research answers the questions what learning needs SMEs appear to have and what causes their lack of attention for competence development by learning and training. Secondly this research discussed whether an e-assessment instrument can actually stimulate the attention of SMEs for competence development and whether it can empower and improve the conditions for continuous learning in SMEs. Finally this research has also resulted in requirements, which the e-assessment instrument should meet in order to reach its purpose.

In this thesis these questions were answered with the help of other research results in the literature and with the help of results from interviews with experts in the field of consultancy of SMEs.

Both an existing research as well as the interviews with the experts have revealed that Problem-solving skills and communication skills are seen as the key competences for employees in SMEs. Besides these general key competences the experts underlined the importance of more sector specific competences for SMEs.

SMEs appeared to meet quite some barriers that keep them from investments in competence development of their employees. Both the authors in the literature as well as the experts mentioned a lack of time and money and awareness barriers (being unconsciously incompetent) as barriers that keep SMEs from investments in competence development. Besides these barriers the experts also mentioned the barriers of a lack of long-term vision and the fear of educating for the competitors.

Existing research and the interviews with the experts did not exclude that the use of an e-assessment instrument can be a stimulus for SMEs in reaching a continuous learning process. The introduction of an e-assessment in SMEs might not be enough to create an environment for continuous learning, the organizational culture should also support this type of environment with space for feedback and discussion.

Finally these research results have lead to the formulation of requirements for the design of the e-assessment instrument in chapter seven.

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1. Introduction

The research that will be described in this paper is related to the European Leonardo Da Vinci program called “E-assessment of Learning Needs in SMEs”. This Leonardo Da Vinci program has started in January 2005 and will cover a period of two years. In The Netherlands the partner of this project is CINOP (centre for innovation of education). This is the organisation that has given me the input for my research. Besides CINOP in the Netherlands, partner-organisations from Italy, the UK, Germany, Hungary, Lithuania and Czech Republic are involved in this project. This project “E-assessment of learning needs in SMEs” is initiated with the aim to develop a diagnostic e-assessment tool (assessment software) that can be utilised by trainers and training developers in a SME. This tool will have to empower SMEs and improve the conditions for continuous learning. This goal has arisen from signals that SMEs pay little attention to learning in their organisational strategy. The long-term goal is to raise the awareness of learning needs and improves the conditions for developing technical, entrepreneurial and management skills in SMEs.

My contribution to this project has resulted in a conceptual framework based on my research, which will be used for the development of the actual e-assessment tool.

2. The problem statement

2.1. Introduction

SMEs in the current knowledge-based economy are seen as key organizations that can be the motor of innovation and employment, because of their flexibility and capacity to change quickly (Admiraal, De Laat, Lockhorst and Rubens (2004). To benefit from these natural advantages of SMEs, it is very important for SMEs to invest in the competences of their employees. The Report of the Dutch CPB reports an expected considerable shortage in post-initial training in the Netherlands (Centraal Planbureau, 2002). However, the changes towards a knowledge based economy increase the importance of training and learning in work environments. The longevity of knowledge and skills is getting shorter and shorter (Schlichte Bergen, 2004). The things that people learn at school can already be outdated by the time they start working. A diploma is thus not the end of an educational carrier, it is only the beginning. Therefore it is remarkable to see a lack of interest within SMEs for participation in training programs (Schlichte Bergen, 2004). In order to be able to change this attitude of SMEs towards learning, it is important to know the causes of this lack of interest in investment in skills development. The research on learning and training in SMEs is still very limited (Van Gils and Zwart, 2004). The available research information shows however a lack of attention in SMEs for competence development by learning or training.

2.2. The research goal and research question

The aim of this research is:

“The development of a conceptual framework, to be used for the development of an e-assessment instrument for SMEs. This instrument has to be successful in assessing learning needs of employees in SMEs and in empowering and improving the conditions for continuous learning in SMEs”.

The research question is:

“What learning needs do SMEs have and what causes the lack of attention in SMEs for competence development by learning and training? Can an e-assessment instrument stimulate the attention of SMEs for competence development and empower and improve the conditions for continuous learning in SMEs”?

2.3. Hypotheses

In order to be able to answer the above problem definition, the results of the research will show whether the twelve hypotheses that were formulated during this research are supported or not. These hypotheses descend from the assumptions that are described in the proposal that CINOP and the other partners presented to the Leonardo Da Vinci Programme and from the assumptions that were expressed during the meeting of the project partners in Turin which I attended. At the time of this meeting the research had already started. Therefore these hypotheses have gone through a few changes during the research process. According to Maxwell (1996) this is a natural process in qualitative research. He even sees this critical attitude as a necessity during a qualitative research, because formulating explicit hypotheses from the start and never revising them can cause blind spots. Maxwell describes the explicit formulation of the hypotheses during the research as typical for qualitative research. “In case of qualitative research the hypotheses are grounded in the data and developed and tested in interaction with it” (Maxwell, 1996, p.53).

Eventually the research has lead to the next twelve hypotheses:

1. The way that employees in SMEs learn can be characterised as predominantly informal and unstructured;
2. Performance of employees in SME's can be improved by structuring informal learning;
3. It is possible to compose a set of competences which are important for all SMEs to develop, but apart form these general competences it is important that SMEs have specific competences from their line of business at their disposal to assess;
4. Peer assessment is a valuable way for SMEs to perform the assessment;
5. The term "assessment" is associated with judgement and not with development of competences;
6. For improvement of development of competences, assessment should be performed several times during the process of development;
7. The use of ICT for the assessment in SMEs makes assessment more available and useable for SMEs;
8. SMEs experience barriers like a lack of time and money, that keep them from investing in learning and training of their employees;
9. The SMEs that do spend relatively more time and money on competence development are the larger, more substantial companies;
10. An e-assessment instrument aimed at developing competences will stimulate a continues learning process in SMEs.
11. SMEs need experts to help them structuring their learning needs after finishing the assessment;

12. To make the SMEs familiar with the e-assessment instrument, the instrument should be presented to them by parties that SMEs are already acquainted with.

2.4. Relevance of this research

Social relevance of the research

The concept of lifelong learning in the present knowledge economy is on the agenda of many policy makers. To be able to contribute to this new economy, SMEs should start paying attention to investments in competence development. Unfortunately SMEs show a very limited interest in participation in training programs (Schlichte Bergen, 2004). The aim of the project “E-assessment of learning needs in SMEs” is to empower and improve the conditions for continuous learning in SMEs. One wants to reach this goal with the help of the e-assessment instrument, which has to raise the awareness of the existence of learning needs. By raising this awareness one hopes to stimulate investments of SMEs in training and learning of their employees. Since my research supports the successful development of this instrument, this research will indirectly also contribute to the disclosure of learning needs in SMEs and might eventually even contribute to the stimulation of continuous learning in SMEs.

Scientific relevance of the research

As Van Gils and Zwart (2004) already stated, the research on training and learning in SMEs is still very limited. This is already one reason that indicates the scientific relevance of my research. The project “E-assessment of learning needs” is an example of an enlightenment attempt that is described by Pruijt (1997). This enlightenment strategy is described by Pruijt as a strategy from policy makers from outside the organizations to influence policies in organizations with the use of scientific evidence. The partners of this project are also external parties that try to influence the policy in SMEs. In order to reach this influence one started their project with the research that I carried out to find out whether SMEs are in need of such an e-assessment instrument and in what way such an instrument could be usable and helpful for SMEs. Once this research has ended and the e-assessment instrument is developed, one will start with a pilot among SMEs in several countries to test the success of the instrument. Looking for success stories was labelled by Pruijt (1997) as the classic strategy for diffusion. Pruijt (1997, p. 50) concludes from several examples that the involvement of a researcher

can cause or promote social change. The partners in this project try to influence the organizational policies of SMEs by focusing on the individual employees of SMEs. Their first concern is to improve the conditions for continuous learning for individuals in SMEs.

Pruijt also describes the phenomenon of humanizing projects that focus on the development of marketable (software) products. These projects contact organizations to get insight into the demands for the product and these contacts can also be used to test and promote the product. This working-method described looks very similar to the procedure that is followed in the project "E-assessment of learning needs in SMES". However, Pruijt underlines that these types of products risk to result in usable products that eventually do not bring about the social change in the workplace that one initially wanted to reach. The awareness of this risk brings me a challenge to provide the project with a conceptual framework that has arisen from scientific research and which tries to limit the risk of not reaching the mentioned social change in SMEs. In this project the social change that one hopes to achieve is the creation of awareness in SMEs of their learning needs and the creation of environments which stimulate and support continuous learning in SMEs.

2.5. Outline of the thesis

Now that the problem, research question and hypotheses are described, this thesis will continue with an explanation on the methodological framework that describes the research design and decisions on data collection and sampling. Subsequently the results of the literature study will be presented to you. These results will be followed by the analyses of the results of the interviews. Successively these results of the literature study and the results of the interviews will be summarized, compared and interpreted. These conclusions will be translated into succes requirements for the e-assessment instrument that is intended to be developed for the assessment of learning needs in SMEs. In the last two chapters the results of this study will be discussed, the limitations of this study will be criticized and suggestions for future research will be given.

3. Methodological framework

This research has shown results of the literature study and of the interviews with experts in the field of the consultancy of SMEs. Both the literature study as well as the interviews with the experts result in the rejection or the confirmation of the hypotheses that have arisen during the research process.

3.1. Research design

Yin (2003, p.98) states that “any finding or conclusion in a case study is likely to be much more convincing and accurate if it is based on several different sources of information, following a corroboratory mode”. Therefore I will use two sources of data in this research: interviews and literature. The way this research has been carried out can be described as a qualitative research method. This qualitative method can be characterised by its inductive approach, its focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words instead of numbers (Maxwell, 1996). Besides qualitative and inductive, this research can be described as an explorative research. In explorative research the goal is to give explanations for differences and connections. Beforehand you have no explicit ideas about possible connections or differences. At forehand I did have some ideas on certain assumings that existed among the partners the project, but these were to vague to formulate explicit, invariable hypotheses at that time. I did formulate hypotheses, but these have changed and grown during the research. Part of this research, the empirical part of the interviews, is called qualitative field research (Babbie, 1996, p. 285). This research can be labeled as a comparative case study. Comparative case studies can lead to an in-depth study, are suitable for a small amount of units of analyses, use a select sample and are used to collect qualitative data (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2000).

Yin (2003, p.1) stated: “As a research strategy, the case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena”. Since the focus of this research is on an organizational phenomena “competence development of employees in SMEs”, the case study is suited for this specific study. The experts that participated in the interviews have quite similar expertises, but they have experience with all kinds of SMEs, in different parts of the country and in different sectors. Therefore this relatively small, heterogeneous group of experts is capable of giving information that is applicable for a large amount of SMEs in the Netherlands. This case study will be carried out by the hierarchical method (Verschuren & Doorewaard, 2000, p. 172). This

method concerns the study of the separate cases in the first phase of the research. In the second phase of the research, the results of the cases are compared to search for connections and patterns.

3.2. Data collection and data sources

A qualitative research method was chosen for this research because I wanted to gather data that are rich in detail and embedded in a context.

The set of data that will be used in this research will consist of data that derive from the literature study and data that derive from interviews. The interviews will be semi-structured, using a topic list.

3.3. Sampling decisions

In qualitative research the selection of times, settings and/or individuals that can provide the needed information to answer the research question, is very important (Maxwell, 1996). Most sampling in qualitative research can be defined as purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 1996) or criterion-based selection (Maxwell, 1996) Maxwell (1996, p. 17) mentions that Weis (1994) relates qualitative research with the use of panels: "people who are uniquely able to be informative because they are expert in an area or were privileged witnesses to an event". The use of panels is an example of purposeful sampling. In this research a panel has been established consisting of experts in the field of consultancy of entrepreneurs of SMEs, particularly in the field of learning solutions. In case of a small sample Maxwell (1996) advises to deliberately select individuals that are known to be typical. Therefore the goal in the establishment of this panel was to collect a group of individuals, that together had a large amount of knowledge on SMEs at their disposal.

3.3.1. Respondent selection

The first step in the establishment of the panel of experts was to search for companies that were specialised in the consultancy of SMEs. There appeared to be a limited amount of companies with this specialism. Contact with this group through e-mail and telephone has eventually lead to the participation in the interviews of five experts. Two of the interviews with these experts have eventually lead to contact with two other experts that were also representative and willing to cooperate. This type of sampling is called snowball sampling

(Babbie, 2004) The last two experts that participated in the interviews were found through contact with the researchers of the the research of Admiraal et.al. (2004). These two experts were participating in an expert group that took part in this research. These two expert both working in branch organisations. The search for experts has not been very easy because many experts were too busy to cooperate because of the holliday period in sight. However, eventually I managed to find nine experts that were representative and willing to coopertate in the interviews.

In the Netherlands a group of 9 experts was interviewed to test in practice the results of the literature study and to collect results for the rejection or confirmation of the hypotheses. The interviews in the Netherlands, held with experts on the field of SMEs and learning, were held to answer the following questions:

- What is the association of the experts with the term assessment?
- What learning needs do they identify in SMEs?
- What competences are seen as key-competences for employees in SMEs?
- To what measure do SMEs pay attention to the development of their employees by learning and training?
- What barriers in SMEs for competence development by learning and training do the experts identify?
- Is an e-assessment instrument suited to meet the learning needs in SMEs?
- Is it possible to compose a group of competences that are important to develop for all SMEs?
- Is it possible to create a process of continuous learning in SMEs?
- Does the use of ICT for assessment bring a surplus value for SMEs?
- What factors in SMEs can influence the success of the implementation of the e-assessment instrument?
- Should the e-assessment instrument be used only once or also during the learning process, which follows after the e-assessment test?
- Should a form of self-assessment be used or should the assessment be carried out by a form of peer-assessment in SMEs?

3.3.2. Literature selection

The literature study specifically had to answer the following questions:

- Which conceptions exist on learning and competence development in organisations?
- What are the learning needs of SMEs?
- To what degree do SMEs pay attention to competence development by learning and training?
- What variables cause the lack of attention in SMEs for competence development by learning and training?
- What competences are seen as key-competences for employees in SMEs?
- To what degree do SMEs use ICT for learning?

The data from the literature study and the interviews with the nine experts in The Netherlands together resulted in conclusions considering the requirements that the e-assessment tool for SMEs has to meet to be successful for the assessment of learning needs in SMEs.

4 Literature study

4.1. Conceptions on learning, training and competence development in organisations

Learning is seen as an active, constructive process. In this process the learner builds new knowledge on his/her existing knowledge structure and understands this new knowledge from this existing knowledge (Segers, 2004, p. 6). In this process of learning the existing knowledge structure of the individual keeps changing.

Several authors on learning organisations pay attention to the values that are assumed to be important for the creation of a good learning climate (Baars- van Moorstel, 2002, p.26-28). Several authors endorse the importance of the existence of a tolerance for making mistakes. From this perception mistakes offer learning opportunities. Several authors do also agree on the importance of the existence of room for experimentation. These experiments would also create situations in which employees learn (Baars- van Moorsel, 2002). Of course this value goes together with the first value mentioned, since experiments can also turn out into mistakes. A third value that is mentioned by several authors is the importance of openness and dialogue (Baars- van Moorstel, 2002). Argyris & Schön emphasize that this can lead to “double loop” learning besides “single loop” learning by discussing action theories (Ramondt, 1996). These ideas of Argyris & Schön will also be discussed in paragraph 4.2.1. A fourth value that is pointed out by several authors is the importance of room for interaction and cooperation in organisations. These authors share the opinion that employees can learn from each other. All of these authors on learning organisations mention the influence of organisational culture on learning abilities of organisations and their employees to learn but none of these authors has explicitly described this term. ¹Schein (1998) was the first author that gave a definition of the term organisational culture. This author describes the arise of an organisational culture from the solving of problems within the organisation by the member of this organisation. According to Schein (1998) the organisational culture is build on the standard solutions that are unconsciously used for the solution of problems.

Baars- van Moorsel (2002) distinguishes two extremes in the conceptions on goals of education and learning in organisations. The supporters of the performance conception plead

¹ “The pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has inveted, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to percieve, think, and feel as related to those problems” (as cited in Baars- van Moorsel, 2002, p. 33).

for a strong connection between education and learning and the organisational goals. The supporters of the humanistic conception plead for a focus of training and education on the personal development of employees.

Baars- van Moorsel (2002) describes a change in the perceptions on the contents of educations in time. In the past employees were supposed to possess specific techniques of their profession, while nowadays organisations attach more importance to social communication and social normative competences. This shift can be seen in the recruitment policy of employers. Baars- van Moorsel (2002) mentions that Moelker (1992) has investigated this shift according to the contents of recruitment advertisements. He has found an increasing demand for social normative competences such as flexibility, creativity and team spirit. He also concludes that there has been a horizontal expansion within duties in which broad professional skills are more important than specific techniques of that profession.

Baars- van Moorsel (2002) also concludes a shift in conceptions on training/education didactics. In the past the model of knowledge transfer was very important. Characteristic for this model is the transfer of specific knowledge and skills to employees by trainings and educations. From this perception new knowledge will lead to a change of the behaviour of employees. Several authors have criticized this model. Bolhuis en Simons (2001) criticize the limited transfer of knowledge in this type of learning (Baars- van Moorsel, 2002, p. 107). The participants in this type of learning often have problems with the translation of the knowledge that was learned in class into situations that occur in practice. According to Baars-van Moorsel (2002) Poel (2001) criticizes the limited involvement of the employees in the composition and development of their work and learning, the limited use of possibilities to learn in the organisation and the view of the model of knowledge transfer that training and learning can be managed in a controlled and predictable process.

Another shift in the perceptions on training and learning at work is mentioned by Baars- van Moorsel (2002). This shift is seen in who is responsible for the development of employees. Until recently training and learning were seen as a responsibility of organisations. From this point of view goals for learning are strongly related to goals of the organisation. At this moment this responsibility for training and learning in organisations is more and more seen as a shared responsibility of both the organisation as well as the employees. From this perception the management of an organisation should offer the facilities that make learning possible and create a context in which the learning of employees is stimulated. The creation

of this context can be supported by technologie (ICT), by “flattening” the organisation structure to shorted communication lines and by the creation of an organisation culture that stimulates learning (Baars- van Moorsel, 2002).

4.2. Training and Learning in SMEs

The definition of the concept “SME” overarches enterprises that are very different in nature. To mention only the size dimension, an SME can total up to 249 employees, but can also be as small as a one-person enterprise. According to the 2003 survey of the Observatory of European SMEs, micro-enterprises (<10 employees) cover total 92 % of all SMEs (Daelen, Miyata, Op de Beek, Schmitz, Van den Branden, Van Petegem, 2005)

SMEs do not only differ in size, but they also differ strongly in the knowledge-intensity of their business, in the complexity of their working process and in the degree to which they are internationally oriented.

SMEs in the current knowledge-based economy are seen as key organizations that can be the motor of innovation and employment, because of their flexibility and capacity to change quickly.

To benefit from these natural advantages of SMEs, it is very important for SMEs to invest in the competences of their employees. In order to be able to change lack of interest of SMEs in learning and training (Schlichte Bergen, 2004), it is important to know the causes of this lack of interest in investment in skill development.

Unfortunately, the available theory on training and learning in SMEs is very limited (Van Gils and Zwart, 2004). However, the research that is available, stresses out the obstacles that SMEs meet in a knowledge-based economy. In order to guarantee long-term survival, SMEs should invest in the development of the right competencies. After all, a more active learning orientation and a better use of knowledge sources, is related to a higher growth of SMEs (Van Gils and Zwart, 2004).

This chapter will look at the perspective that SMEs have on learning and training, their learning needs, motives for SMEs to invest in training and learning and it will give a summary of the barriers that keep SMEs from investing in learning and training.

4.2.1. Attitudes towards learning in SMEs.

In this paragraph I will discuss four ways of looking towards learning in companies. I will reflect on the way that SMEs see the process of training and learning. In summary I will point out some essential characteristics of learning in SMEs.

In relation to organisational learning Ramondt (1996) mentions that Argyris and Schön have made a categorical distinction in the process of learning in organisations. They call these processes Single loop-, Double loop- and Multi loop learning.

- Single loop learning is also called adaptive learning. In this type of learning one is only focused on solving errors within the existing framework of rules and standards. The learning behaviour aims on reaching the existing goals and improving the performance of the organisation within the existing framework.
- The learning is called double loop learning when the organisation takes the effort to discuss the existing framework of rules and standards in order to find the origin of the problem and when this framework is changed if necessary. This second type of learning is also called generative learning.
- The last type of learning called multi loop learning is the most desirable level of learning. On this level learning is an ongoing process. Organisations that want to reach this level of learning have to create a permanent evaluation of actions and choices in the organisation. This evaluation has to be part of every job in the organisation. The sharing of knowledge is very important at this level of learning. To reach this level a decentralized, flat structure is the most suitable kind of structure.

Adaptive or single loop learning limits the innovative behaviour of the organisation, which makes these organisations less competitive. Ramondt (1996) mentions that the research of Argyris and Schön (1993) has shown that most organisations learn in an adaptive, single loop way. Unfortunately more recent research on the amount of organizations that learn in a single-, double- or multi-loop way has not been found.

Loek Nieuwenhuis (2004) distinguishes four types of rationalities or views of learning:

- Learning seen as preparation for work (serial rationality):
From this view serial learning is the more traditional way of learning in educational institutions, which is predictable, structured and planned. Serial learning is related to the perspective of working after learning.
- Learning seen as part of the execution of work (parallel rationality):
In parallel learning, the learning is an element of working processes. This type of learning is unpredictable, incidental and derives from production goals. This perspective of learning implies that learning goals are inferior to production goals. Learning goals are concluded from what is needed in the working process and organisations are looking for suppliers of knowledge that is tailor-made (Nieuwenhuis; Jager; Mittendorff; Hoeve, 2004). From this view learning is not related to a fixed, planned time within one can learn, in contrast with the planned, serial learning.
- Learning seen as a way of innovating work (vitalising rationality):
Organisations that see learning as a part of innovating work learn in a continuing process. They are focused on innovation in order to remain competitive advantages. Innovation is reached by knowledge sharing and constant evaluation around the development of products or services.

Notice that the last view of vitalising rationality could also be described as a way of multi-loop learning. According to Loek Nieuwenhuis (2004), most SMEs see learning as part of the execution of work. This type of attitude towards training and learning is less dominant in SMEs involved in technological sectors, where keeping up with the latest developments is essential for survival (Lange; Ottens; Taylor, 2000).

A third perspective on the process of learning in organisations is the distinction between formal and informal learning:

- Formal learning:
“Formal learning includes the hierarchically structured school system that runs from primary school through the university and organized school-like programs created in business for technical and professional training.” (M. Conner, 1993-2005).
- Informal learning:
“Informal learning describes a lifelong process whereby individuals acquire attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influences and

resources in his or her environment, from family and neighbours, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media". (M. Conner, 1993-2005).

The European Commission (2001: 32) has defined informal learning as: "Learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional, but is in most cases non-intentional".

Admiraal, De Laat, Lockhorst and Rubens (2004) surveyed 132 managers/owners of SMEs in The Netherlands to investigate the use of ICT and learning in SMEs. They underline the fact that SMEs use informal learning more frequently than formal learning. This statement was also supported by ²Johnson (2000): "The training (or more accurately learning) that does take place in most SMEs tends to be informal, on-the-job and related to short term business objectives or problems". Looking back at the views of learning that Nieuwenhuis distinguished, serial rationality is similar to formal learning and parallel rationality and vitalising rationality are similar to informal learning. Supporters of informal learning at work plead for the creation of a powerful learning environment in organisations. These supporters do have different perceptions on the way that this learning environment can be created. Organizing the work in such a way that the work and the workplace offers a lot of learning opportunities is favoured by one group.

Another group of authors favour the stimulation of cooperation between employees and the creation of feedback opportunities (Baars- van Moorsel, 2002).

In the study of Skule (2004) seven characteristics of the most learning intensive jobs were identified. According to the study of Skule these learning conditions have significant effects on informal learning at work. Skule's study has shown that learning intensive jobs are characterized by:

- ❑ A high degree to exposure to changes;
- ❑ A high degree of exposure to demands (from customers, managers etc.);
- ❑ Managerial responsibilities;
- ❑ Extensive professional contacts;
- ❑ Superior feedback is part of the job;
- ❑ Management support for learning is part of the organisational culture;

² Johnson (2000) in *Lifelong learning and SMEs: issues for research and policy*.

- Rewarding of proficiency is part of the job.

The fifth and last perspective distinguishes three types of learning; guided learning, action learning and experience based learning (Simons and Bolhuis, 2001). Guided learning is very similar to formal learning. This type of learning refers to an externally planned and structured learning programme which takes place outside the working environment in a formal learning situation. Action learning derives from the own initiative of the individual without compulsion from others. This type of learning is planned and directed by the individual and takes place on the job or in the private life. Experience based learning is not planned and takes place during the working process. The learning is steered by problems or innovations that are related to work. A few years later Simons and Bolhuis (2001) found out that these three ways of learning were not very helpful in describing workplace learning. After performing further research on workplace learning they proposed a refined model. Instead of the distinction in guided, experience based learning and action learning, for workplace learning they preferred to distinguish: a) deliberate vs. spontaneous learning and b) kinds of developmental relatedness (learning alone, learning from others and learning with others). This new distinction underlines the social dimension in workplace learning, where learning is part of developing a professional identity and involves emotions in a “real life” context and where hierarchical relations characterize the social work context. Simons and Bolhuis (2001) also stress that the need for certain knowledge and the value of obtained knowledge changes every day at the workplace. Whether the obtained new knowledge at the workplace leads to an improvement of results in the working process is always questionable because of this process of continuing change (Simons, 2004).

4.2.2. Motives and Barriers for learning and training for SMEs

In this first part of this paragraph we will deal with the attitude of SMEs towards the importance of professional development through learning and training for their organisation and for their employees.

Motives

Which motives do SMEs have to invest in training and learning of their employees? Do they want to improve the performance of employees, reduce client complaints, innovate products etc.? These goals mentioned could all be motives for SMEs to invest in training and learning. Unfortunately the limited research on learning in SMEs does not explicitly name possible

motives. The available research does point out that SMEs motive for investments are linked with costs and output. Whether one is interested in the perfection of the primary process by investment in education or training depends on the costs in proportion to the benefits. Their limited capital should be invested with care. Before investing in competence development of employees, SMEs want some prove of the profitable output of this investment. The problem with most training and learning programmes is the fact that the profitable results will not be seen on short-term, but only on the long-term. And most SMEs are focused on the short run and they need results as soon as possible. The remaining part of this paragraph will discuss an overview of barriers that limit SMEs in their investment in learning and training.

Barriers

Which barriers do SMEs meet on their way to the development of a visible learning culture in order to stay innovative and competitive?

Lange, Ottens and Taylor (2000) have divided the barriers to competence development in SMEs into four categories:

1. Cultural barriers: attitudes towards competence development;
2. Financial barriers: related to the direct and indirect costs of training and learning;
3. Access and provision barriers: the prevention of SMEs to pay attention to competence development because of their ad-hoc working method and because the lack of suitable provision of tailor-made learning;
4. Awareness barriers: a lack of the knowledge of learning opportunities.

Cultural barriers

There are significant cultural differences between small and large firms. In the previous chapter it was already mentioned that managers of SMEs relate learning and training to formal ways of learning. This can be a cultural barrier, because these managers don't see other opportunities for learning and training within the organisation. There are also structural differences between small and large firms. Large firms have a more hierarchical structure and smaller firms have a more horizontal structure of working. This causes more multi-skilled jobs for employees in small firms, which makes it more difficult to match these jobs to specific job-descriptions and education and training.

The training culture also affects the attitude of employees towards education and training. When the organisation has not paid attention to competence development for a long time, a

sudden offer to training or education can be seen as a punishment instead of a positive investment.

Financial barriers

It is often argued that economies of scale keep SMEs from benefiting from training and education. Reasons for not participating in Lifelong Learning activities were for 30 per cent of the SMEs the “financial constraints” and 15 per cent mentioned “lost production time” as a factor that keeps them from investing in competence development. Large firms are able to cut costs by making special deals with suppliers of training and education, but because of their small size, SMEs cannot make this kind of deals (Lange et al., 2000). SMEs cannot afford to make a misstep with their scarce capital.

Especially the smaller SMEs, perceive training as a cost rather than as an investment. Their preference goes to the recruitment of fully trained people or to the outsourcing of some activities (Daelen et al., 2004). SMEs do not only see a barrier in the financial costs of learning, they also see a barrier in the costs of time spend on learning during the working process (Becta ICT research, 2005).

Access and provision barriers

The third barrier consists of two problems. First, learning and training are more structured and planned in large firms than in smaller firms (regular approach). The SMEs only pay attention to learning and training when they really need it (ad hoc approach). Of course this way of problem solving is not the most optimal way of learning. This ad hoc approach also makes it more difficult for SMEs to find the most appropriate education or training because of the short time they have for their search. Because of their unique expertise SMEs search for tailor-made training programs, but the offer of such programs is very limited.

Awareness barriers

The last barrier mentioned reveres to the lack of knowledge in SMEs about the several options available for competence development of their employees. SMEs appear to give low priority to professional development. This low priority is partly caused by the absence of experience with professional development and a lack of knowledge with the managers or (Lange et al, 2000). SME employers are also very often reluctant to invest in people, because they fear that the employee is likely to be poached away by competitors. They can also make their training employees sign a contract, which makes them responsible for the

costs of education when they leave the company in a short period after finishing the training or learning. Managers of SMEs are often unaware of this possibility (Daelen et al., 2004).

4.2.3. Conclusions

Most SMEs see learning as a way to optimise the existing primary process (single loop learning) and do not see it as an opportunity to redesign the primary process (double and multi loop learning). In general, managers in SMEs look at learning and training as something that is paid attention to only when necessary. They do not see training and learning as part of a continuous competence development process, which is connected to their business activity.

Characteristically SMEs focus on their own unique expertise. This expertise knowledge is shared much easier by the use of informal communication. As mentioned by Admiraal et al. most of the learning in SMEs is not aimed at formal education and training. However, formal ways of learning can be useful so as well. According to Lange, Ottens and Taylor (2002), formal learning and training has the advantage of obtaining accredited experience and knowledge from sources outside the own organisation. Accredited experience can give organisations a competitive advantage to their market rivals. Also external information from formal learning/training programmes can stimulate innovation in organisations. For these reasons there should be a balance between the formal and informal learning activities in SMEs. The transformation of the unique learning process, which is closely related to the working process into formal training programs, is very difficult (Daelen et al., 2004) This conclusion could explain the fact that SMEs do not participate very often in formal learning or training. From this analysis one can conclude that most SMEs do not have a visible learning culture, they learn “just-in-time” in order to solve problems. For the SMEs it is important to accentuate on learning by experience, by problem solving, in order to see the direct results of the learning.

According to the Becta ICT research (2005), the absence of a visible learning culture in SMEs is due to:

- 1) Their parallel view of learning; learning as a by-product of working
- 2) The problems regarding the translation of learning needs into formal education programmes;
- 3) Limited structure of learning activities at the working place.

Next to cultural, financial, access & provision and awareness barriers SMEs deal with a lack of time for learning and a lack of tailor-made programmes for learning and training. Admiraal et al. already pointed out that the informal learning in SMEs has to be structured and not ad hoc. The connection to development of competencies of employees is mentioned as a way to prevent an unstructured ad hoc learning in SMEs. By the insight in the present and desired competencies for the future, SMEs can structure their learning. The focus should be on improving ways for employees and employers to measure this competence gap and to use this information for (self) planned and co-operative learning. This type of learning can take place in an informal learning environment but also in a formal learning environment. The present informal learning culture of SMEs demands flexible ways of learning that make it possible to plan and structure the learning in SMEs in the most suitable way. Learning could be made more flexible by the use of ICT. In the next chapter we will look at the present role that ICT has in SMEs in order to explore the opportunities of supporting training and learning in SMEs by ICT.

4.3. The role of ICT in learning and training in SMEs

This chapter is about the opportunities and restrictions that SMEs face in using ICT for supporting learning and training in their organisation. This chapter is important to investigate the opportunities and restrictions of the “e” in the e-assessment instrument.

First the use of ICT in learning and training in SMEs will be discussed, followed by the barriers that SMEs face with the introduction of ICT in learning and training. Next, I will review several building blocks for organizations to stimulate the use of ICT for learning and training. To conclude I end with some suggestions to overcome the barriers mentioned.

4.3.1. The use of ICT in learning and training in SMEs

One can distinguish two main types of e-resources that can support learning: computer-accessed resources (e.g. CD-ROMs, databases or web sites) and computer mediated communication resources (e.g. audio, textual and video conferencing) (Guile, 2002). Both type of e-resources can be used to support learning and training. The use of ICT for different purposes in SMEs is portrayed in figure 1. In SMEs ICT is rarely used for learning and training: only 11 percent of the managers of SMEs reports that they use ICT for this goal (Admiraal et al., 2004). The use of ICT for communication however is more common. In

about half of the SMEs ICT is used for communications with suppliers and colleagues in other companies. ICT is often used for communication with customers (59 %).

Use of ICT for specific purposes	%	high frequency
Searching the Internet	62	
Communication with suppliers	59	
Communication with others	47	
Communication with colleagues in other companies	45	
Communication within company	34	
Communication with customers	22	
Communication with associations	11	
Learning and training	38	
Help		

Figure 1: Frequency of the use of ICT for specific purposes.

(“ICT and learning in Small- and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs)”, Admiraal; De Laat; Lockhorst; Rubens, 2004).

Population of the survey: 132 SMEs in Holland

In chapter 4.2.3 the absence of a visible learning culture in SMEs has been mentioned. When learning and training is not identified as an activity in SMEs, then there are limited possibilities for ICT to support these activities. This may partly explain the limited use of ICT for learning and training (11 percent of the managers of SMEs reports to use ICT for learning and training). This statement is supported by the research of Admiraal et al. They conclude that managers of SMEs often relate learning to a formal way of obtaining knowledge through courses, seminars, workshops or lectures. This could be one of the reasons for the low perception of the use of ICT for learning and training (Admiraal et al, 2004). Managers of SMEs simply don't see the use of online courses or exchanging knowledge through e-mail or other ICT applications as learning.

ICT does support communication within the company (32%), and between colleagues in other companies (45 %), which can support informal ways of learning. Taking informal learning into account then ICT might have a more dominant role in supporting learning.

The use of different types of applications is summarized in figure 2. The described applications can also be used to support the learning process. When you look at the matrix below you can see that 29 percent of the SMEs uses online courses and 64 percent uses CD Rom, which can both be used for learning and training. Furthermore it's possible to learn when using e-mail (95 percent) and other ICT applications which make it possible to share information and thus to learn.

ICT applications used	Yes (in %)
e-mail	95
Administration software	86
Cd Rom	64
Presentation software	48
Online courses	29
video conferencing	4
newsgroups / discussion boards	10
Other4	28

Figure 2: Frequencies of ICT applications used ("ICT and learning in Small- and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs)", Admiraal; De Laat; Lockhorst; Rubens, 2004).

Population of the survey: 132 SMEs in Holland.

These results underline that employees in SMEs are often unaware of their learning. This unawareness could be caused by the unstructured and unplanned nature of the learning at work in SMEs.

4.3.2. Differences in the use of ICT in learning and training per sector.

Levis (in Becta ICT research, 2005) investigated the differences in e-learning adoption between different market segments and concludes that the differences are significant. Levis distinguishes two forms of adoption: a radical, systematic approach and a more tactical approach. The radical approach is used by a few early adopters and the tactical approach is used by the vast majority. In tactical approaches e-learning is introduced to solve specific problems. This tactical approach shows resemblance with the approach of adaptive learners in chapter 1. Radical approaches are lined to systematic, strategic shifts in organisational thinking about learning and knowledge. In this last radical approach, the critical factor of competitive success is knowledge sharing. Sectors that were named as early adopters

included IT and telecommunication, banking and financial services and the consulting industry. These sectors are representing the services sector, which is more likely to adopt e-learning than manufacturers. Characteristics of these early adopters are:

- consisting of large dispersed field workers ;
- rapid launches of new products and frequent updates;
- automation in customer services operations;
- management of knowledge and intellectual capital is part of the working process.

Becta ICT research (2005) reports that in 2002, the Leonardo Supporting Online Learning and Teaching (SOLT) Project surveyed trainers that delivered e-learning to SMEs in six European countries: the UK, Germany, Denmark, Italy, Hungary and Slovakia. The majority of the SMEs that were involved in e-learning were companies with an orientation on training and could be identified as the “early adopters” mentioned before. They had implemented e-learning particularly to increase the quality of training, for cost saving and ease of delivery, especially where multiple establishments were involved.

4.3.3. Barriers and advantages for SMEs regarding the use of ICT in learning and training.

In this paragraph I will discuss the barriers for SMEs using ICT in general for learning and training (e-learning). With regard to learning and training, ICT is unfortunately rarely mentioned to be used in SMEs in terms of complete learning or training programmes (Admiraal et al, 2004). In general the manager’s attitudes towards the use of ICT are quite positive. They do have obstacles to the use of the Internet. Their main objective to the use of the Internet is seen in the lack of experiences of their employees with the Internet.

The Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative (SFEDI) (Becta ICT research, 2005) organised a series of workshop in the UK between 2003 and 2004 on e-learning for SMEs. The participants mentioned three main problems related to e-learning:

- a lack of knowledge of the available provision in e-learning for SMEs;
- the costs of investments and time spend on the learning, not just e-learning;
- limited access to broadband for a lot of small firms.

Size and amount of working locations appear to be the key variables in the use of ICT in SMEs. (Admiraal et al, 2004). Size seems to be the most imported variable to determine the

possibilities of ICT in the company and to determine the attitude of the managers towards the use of ICT for learning and training. This conclusion is also supported by the research of Daelen et al.(2005), in which size is also pointed as the factor of most influence, next to the “busy” culture of SMEs that causes a lack of time for training and learning. The larger the amount of employees and the amount of work locations, the more the objectives against ICT related to learning decrease and the insight in the advantages of e-learning increases. In the production sector, managers in the survey of Admiraal et al. have a more negative attitude towards the role of the branch-organisation in learning in comparison with managers in other sectors. On the other hand, Admiraal et al. found a positive relation between the percentage of skilled workers in SMEs and the use of ICT and the role of external organisations such as branch-organisations and academic institutions in training and learning in SMEs.

Admiraal et al. have also found a positive relation between the complexity of the work process and the use of ICT. The more complex the working process, the higher the use of ICT. Complex business processes that are part of a network of suppliers, partners and customers and together form an integrated business network need more ICT support. Figure 3 gives an overview of this relationship. The process of business development shown in the matrix could be defined as the enlargement of the complexity, in terms of more integrated business processes. Complexity is not necessarily related to size of an organization. This means that SMEs are not excluded from reached the highest level of learning because of their size. Small companies with a complex working process will also feel the need to manage the internal and external dialogue and to involve customers in their product development. They are however limited in financial capacity to invest in complex ICT systems.

Figure 3: Types of Business Transformations Supported by E-Resources
(Guile, 2002)

Degree of change and development	Localised exploitation	Internal integration	Business process re-engineering	Business network redesign	Business scope redefinition
Working Practices	Set-up PC/email/link to internet Access PC/email and Internet individually	Use PC to: - monitor stock, cash-flow, etc. - exchange information - support discussion & business planning	Re-design process of working and learning and use "e-resources" to: - monitor workflow -develop new competences	Create a "networked" organisation and use "e-resources" to: - support internal dialogue and collaboration with existing customers. - Support knowledge creation and sharing	Transform the scope of the business and use "e-resources" to: - co-opt customer capability - manage customer diversity - co-create new products & services with customers

In chapter 4.2.1. is stated that most organisations only learn in an adaptive, single-loop way (Ramondt, 1996). In the matrix above you can place this type of adaptive learning in the first two columns. In chapter 4.3.2. this type of learning showed resemblance with tactical learning (Becta ICT research, 2005). Most SMEs do not learn in a double loop way, which means that they do not pay attention to the re-design of the business process, which is mentioned in the matrix. The last two columns in the matrix could be defined as the use of e-resources in a double-loop learning process. An internal and external dialogue demands an

ongoing process of evaluation, innovation and learning. Networks of knowledge sharing can bring SMEs to this level of double loop learning.

SMEs do see the benefits that (large) companies can reach from implementing e-learning. However, often the management of SMEs assumes that their company is incapable of implementing e-learning (Schlichte Bergen, 2004). They assume that the companies that do use e-learning, have a better financial position, a better technological infrastructure, and a better training environment. Another barrier to the use of e-learning for managers of SMEs is the problem of judgement of the quality of the e-learning program. The judgement of the suitability of an e-learning instrument is much more difficult than the assessment of a formal, school-related learning or training program. Managers of SMEs should get access to figures and benchmarking information on e-learning tools to make an objective decision (Daelen, 2004).

According to Schlichte Bergen (2004) Urdan and Weggen determined five building blocks for e-learning success. These building blocks for implementing e-learning are first mover advantages, scalable models, interactivity, complete solutions and attention to global reach. All of these building blocks seem to be very difficult to fulfil for SMEs. First, SMEs hardly ever run the risk of being a first mover. Second, they do not have the opportunities to profit from scale advantages. Third, in general they have a closed attitude towards being interactive with other organisations. Fourth, they offer specific specialties instead of complete solutions and last, most of them are focused on their direct surroundings.

In the next paragraphs the possibilities for SMEs to deal with these building blocks and other barriers for learning and training with or without ICT will be described.

What characteristics of SMEs contribute positively to the success of the implementation of learning with the use of ICT? In general, the disadvantages of large companies are the advantages of smaller companies and reverse. For instance, the organizational structure of SMEs, often non-hierarchical and flat, can be advantageous. This structure makes SMEs more flexible to adapt to a changing environment and the flat structure can take care of a less complicated and faster decision-making process. These characteristics can contribute to a successful implementation of ICT in learning (Schlichte Bergen, 2004).

4.3.4. How to make the use of ICT in learning and training in SMEs possible?

Can the barriers mentioned in the previous chapter be overcome? Schlichte Bergen (2004) gives three suggestions on how to make learning with ICT in SMEs possible:

1. Building the technological infrastructure on an existing technological infrastructure or on an external infrastructure to overcome the financial barriers;
2. Make use of government support;
3. Working together with branch-organisations, academic institutions or other umbrella cooperation's to profit from the advantages of knowledge sharing.

Following from the above suggestions; an open attitude of SMEs towards other (supporting) organisations could positively influence learning. However, the SMEs in the study of Admiraal et al. (2004), are quite reserved in the role of other organisations in learning and training in their SMEs.

As stated before, SMEs are in need of tailor made learning programs. However, tailor made courses are quite expensive (Daelen et al., 2005). This conclusion is confirmed in the Becta ICT Research (2005), which specifies that networking with eventual competitors might create economies of scale and make custom made courses affordable.

SMEs involved in strategic alliances show an improved performance and have the access to those competencies that bring them closer to the guarantee of long-term survival (Van Gils and Zwart, 2004). However, several entrepreneurs in the investigation of Van Gils and Zwart did not wish to cooperate with other companies, because they were afraid of transferring their know-how and losing their competitive advantage. This research also showed that strategic alliances are more important for companies in environments with a fast changing technology.

Besides this, a shift is needed from formal training (e-learning) towards integrated knowledge management, knowledge sharing (including informal learning) and change management (Daelen et al., 2005). According to these authors a "fusion" of technology, learning and work should be realised.

This chapter has pointed out some restrictions related to the use of ICT in SMEs. The partners involved in this project are aware of these restrictions. In their application for this

project they even mention the goal to indirectly develop ICT skills of employees in SMEs by using ICT for assessing learning needs.

4.3.5. Conclusions

Managers of SMEs often appear to relate learning to formal learning. Formal learning and training is limited in SMEs and consequently the use of ICT in learning is limited. However the use of ICT for communication is more widespread and can be related to informal learning. The research of Admiraal et al. showed that larger SMEs use ICT more frequent and intensive than smaller SMEs, it has also shown that SMEs with more skilled workers also use ICT more intensive. The presence of more skilled workers could be due to the complexity of the working process in these companies. Size thus seems to be not the only variable that influences the use of ICT (in learning), complexity does too. Besides the size and the amount of skilled workers, a lack of experience with working with ICT and a feeling of incompetence considering the possibilities of ICT in learning for SMEs are mentioned to be the variables that influence the use of ICT in SMEs.

But SMEs do not only have barriers that keep them from using ICT for learning, they also have characteristics that contribute to a successful implementation of ICT in learning, such as a short decision-making process and the flexibility to change quickly. Finally the last paragraph has given suggestions of how to overcome the several barriers that were mentioned in this chapter. In the next chapter I will discuss the e-assessment instrument, that is seen by the partners of the project "E-assessment of learning needs" as an opportunity for SMEs to pay more attention to competence development and innovation in a more planned and structured way: an e-assessment tool.

4.4. The use of e-assessment tools for competence development

In order to support SMEs in their learning capacities, support should be focused on structuring informal learning (Admiraal et al., 2004). This type of learning should remain flexible and structured. Flexible in terms of learning at any time and at any place and structured by individual and organisational learning goals. By using ICT in learning, flexibility can be accomplished. To structure learning, SMEs should start with making an inventory of the learning needs of individuals and of the organisation as a whole (Admiraal et al., 2004). Assessment could be a helpful instrument to make this inventory. The results of this

inventory of the learning needs should result in planned and structured learning goals for the organisation and her employees. The initiative of the Small Firms Growth Plan is one of the limited examples of the use an instrument that meets the descriptions of the e-assessment instrument that the partners of this project have in mind and which was tested by SMEs.

The Small Firms Growth Plan, with 502 micro businesses, organised a pilot for e-learning business courses (Becta ICT Research, 2005). The offer to the micro businesses includes the use of the learndirect Business Snapshot. This tool offered a standardised approach to assess the training needs in the organisation and to develop an appropriate training plan. This pilot led to the successful completing of the training courses by 90 % of the owner managers. In the end, their participation led to 43 % of the employees completing training courses as well. Over 40% of the owner managers indicated that the training needs identified by the Business Snapshot, were their main reason for training their employees. The results of the use of the Business Snapshot underline the importance of the use an instrument that gives an inventory in order to identify the learning needs within SMEs. The Business Snapshot is unfortunately a rare example of evidence for the use of e-assessment related instruments in SMEs to stimulate learning.

The “e” in e-assessment points at the use of ICT instruments for the support of the assessment procedure. Assessment itself is a complex notion with different meanings. Assessment is usually used for the evaluation of job performance in order to determine whether a person is suited for a present job or for judging applicants suitability (Klarus, 1998). Another application of assessment is used in formal education. Here it refers to determining the suitability of a person for a general working area for instance the field of business management, engineering, etc. (Elshout-Mohr and Oostdam, 2001). Eshout-Mohr also emphasises the use of multi dimensional assessment. An assessment can be based on the opinion of one or more assessors, furthermore the opinion of possible colleagues can be added and in some cases the opinion of the person which is assessed is taken into account. These types of assessment are called 180° or 360° feedback methods. The aim of the project “E-assessment of learning needs” is to use e-assessment for the professional development of employees in SMEs. The focus of this instrument should be on development of competences instead the judgement of the suitability of the employees.

Simons and Bolhuis (2001) show in the below model their ideal view of how individual learning should be organised.

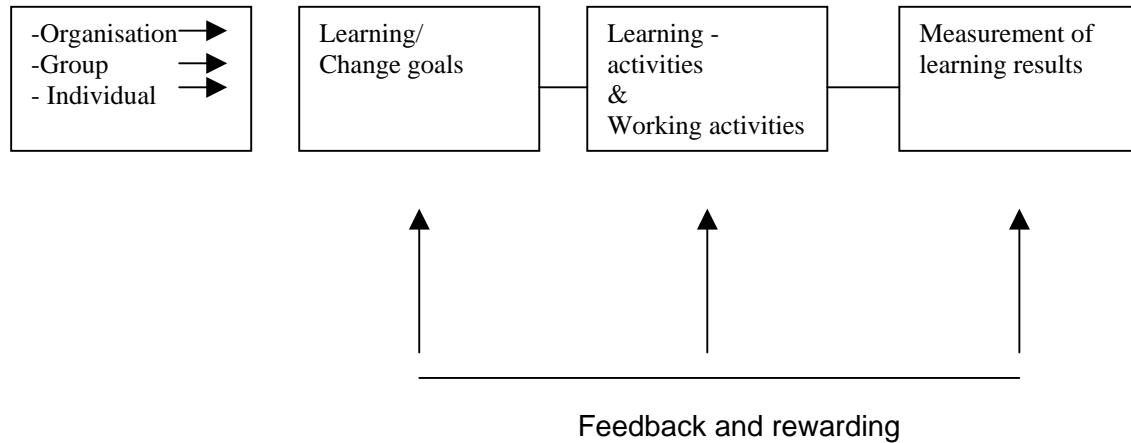


Figure 4: Individual learning model

Simons and Bolhuis underline the importance of the tuning of organisational learning goals on individual learning goals. They underline the importance for the organisation to communicate their collective goals and future plans. This model also points out the importance of the measurement of the learning results after or during the learning activities. The measurement of the results is not only important for the organisation, but is also important for the motivation and stimulation of the individual.

4.4.1. A classification in e-assessment types.

Daniëls, Ruijs and Vermetten (2004) have made a classification of assessment types. They distinguish the following assessment types:

I (Classic) testing with closed questions

This type of testing involves “objective testing”, using selected response items. Examples are right/wrong questions, multiple-choice questions and matching questions.

This type of testing is used for evaluation purposes. This testing takes place at the end of a learning process, but it can also take place at the beginning.

II (Classic) testing with open questions

This type of testing involves written questions or verbal questions. The assessed person has to formulate the answer without the help of choice options.

This type of testing is used for evaluation purposes. This type of testing takes place at the end of a learning process.

III Performance assessment

The obtained knowledge or skills are tested through an assignment in which a certain complex problem has to be solved. Those assignments are connected with realistic situations. This type of testing is used for summative assessment.

IV Assessment and development centers

Assignments in simulated situations try to measure and/or predict the behaviour of the assessed in real situations. The assignments are based on the contents of the present-day or future job. Usually several observers who are trained in his task perform the judgement. The aim is to stimulate the development and change of the behaviour in the desired direction (Tillema, 1996, in Daniëls et al.).

This type of testing is used development or for evaluation. This type of testing usually takes place at several points of time in the learning process.

V Portfolio assessment.

A portfolio consists of a collection of evidence that shows what the assessed has learned so far (Brown, 1997, in Daniëls et al.). Portfolios are often used in combination with self-assessment. A portfolio is particularly suitable for the demonstration of the progress in skills and competences.

This type of testing can be used for the goal of development. This type of assessment can be used at any time in a learning process and has a continuous character. This method is quite time-intensive.

VI Self-, peer-, and co-assessment

This type of assessment can be combined with all of the above mentioned types of assessment. In self-assessment the testing aims at the testing of the personal development by self-reflection. In peer-assessment assessors are judging each other by giving feedback to stimulate the learning process. In co-assessment, a teacher and a student determine the way of judgement and the criteria of judgement. An example of this type of assessment is the 360° feedback method.

This type of testing can be used for developmental purposes. The phase in which the assessment takes place is dependent on the type of judgement.

An inventory of the available assessment tools points out that most of these tools are referring to existing formal structures, such as business plans, business risk assessments or HRD plans, which are often absent in SMEs.

4.4.2. From testing to assessment

According to Segers (2004) Birenbaum (2003) describes an evolution from a “test culture” towards an “assessment culture”. In the test culture separate knowledge parts were measured within integrating them into a certain context. In the assessment culture the connection between knowledge, skills and experiences is very important. Another big difference between the test culture and the assessment culture is the type of learning process. The learning process in the test culture has a clear ending and the learning process in the assessment culture has no clear ending and stimulates and informs on further development of competences. Personal development plans that are often used in working situations and correspond with this continuous learning process that is characteristic for the assessment culture (Segers, 2004). A third difference mentioned is the difference between the dimensions of competences that are measured. With the help of assessment not only cognitive elements of competences can be tested, but also meta-cognitive, affective and social elements. Segers (2004) also mentions a change in the actors that are responsible for the learning process. More and more the learner is responsible for his/her learning process. This is also one of the reasons for the increased use of self-assessment and peer-assessment (Segers, 2004).

4.4.3. General competences

Employers in Australia in the research of Mc Leish (2002) described problem-solving skills as one of the three most appreciated competences. This competence was also mentioned to be one of the six most important competences by the British National Skills Task Force (Segers, 2004). The other two most important competences that were mentioned in the study of Mc Leish (2002) were Working in teams and Communicating ideas and information. These three key competences were followed by Planning and organising, Using technology, Collecting, analysing and organising information and Using mathematical ideas and techniques.

5. Results of the interviews

The participants were observed in face-to-face interviews, which were all tape-recorded. This way judgments of the experts could be analysed within the context of their story during the analysis. Obscurities were cleared away in some cases by contacting the participants again by telephone. The participants that joint the interviews were asked about their perceptions on the learning needs of employees in SMEs, the attention of SMEs for competence development of their employees and about the requirements for an e-assessment instrument to be successful in SMEs. The exact topics that the experts were asked about are described in the extended report on the interviews of each participant that is enclosed in appendix number one. The results of these interview reports have been coded – classifying or categorizing individual pieces of data (Babbie, 2004, p.376) - into nine topics that were discussed during the interviews. Nine experts took part in these semi-structured interviews. I name these participants “experts”, because of their broad experience with the consultancy of SMEs. The participants were experts working at Syntens, PAT Learning Solutions, J en C, MKB Adviseurs, Detaché, Innovam, Kenteq and Memotrainer. More information on the backgrounds of these experts is given in appendix number one.

5.1. Data analyses

1. Acquaintance of the experts with the term assessment and with the use of assessment

All of the experts are acquaintant with the term assessment. The experts knew hardly any examples of the use of assessment in SMEs. The few examples that were mentioned took place in the larger SMEs. The experts mentioned that these larger SMEs use assessment incidental before contracting expensive, highly educated person to be certain of their investment. Strikingly all of the experts appeared to associate assessment with judgement of employees or applicants and not with the development of employees.

2. Learning needs in SMEs

All of the experts described the way of learning in SMEs as an ad hoc way of learning. The learning need was mentioned to arise from the need to solve a work related problem. One of the participants in the interviews explained: “First one tries to solve problems using

information from the direct surroundings. One uses the knowledge from colleagues in the own organisation and sometimes even from colleagues from other organisations". An other participant: "The first source of knowledge is often the Internet. The Internet is often used to look for information in case one is already familiar with the area of knowledge concerned". One of the participants mentioned: "Small firms tend to interfere only when problems arise. Often their long-term view is not very well developed".

From the information that the experts gave in the interviews one could conclude that SMEs only spend time and money on learning and training when a certain necessity forces them to invest in the development of the competences of their employees. The participants in the interview mentioned three types of situation that can create this necessity to invest in training and learning. The first situation described was the situation in which suppliers or clients use certain quality certificates that force the SME to meet the requirements of these certificates. A second situation of necessity described was the arise of new legal rules, for instance safety rules, that force the SME to invest in competence development of the employees on that area.

Finally also the quick technological developments can force SMEs to invest in the competence development of employees to stay competitive. These type of situations are often seen in the so called knowledge-intensive organisations.

According to the experts SMEs learn in an informal and unstructured way. One uses the word informal to point at learning methods that are not involved in learning in a class with the help of a teacher. The experts describe learning in SMEs as unstructured to indicate that employees in SMEs learn ad hoc. This means that they only start looking for learning solutions once problems arise, which was described before. The experts don't mention solutions in structuring informal learning. In their opinion learning in SMEs can be improved by facilitating learning opportunities. "Once you start structuring informal learning, you make it formal". The participant that gave this comment means that the learning process should not be organized along tied paths, but should create space for the learner to organized his/her own learning process. In this situation all learning paths of employees look differently.

One other expert: "One should not try to structure onstructured learning. Organizations should offer employees the opportunity to develop competences by problem solving. This requires an organizational culture that offers the possibility to learn in your own way, whenever you want and in which making mistakes is seen as a learning opportunity. Not offering facilities that offer support for learning in a problem solving way can obstruct the

learning process”. An other experts mentioned: “Many employees in SMEs are unaware of their learning needs”.

In summary the experts described the learning in SMEs as ad hoc and unstructured, informal, in a problem-solving way and arising from a necessity. One advises not to structure learning by formalizing it, but by offering facilities that offer support for the creation of personal learning solutions (formal and informal).

3. Attention of SMEs for competence development of employees

Attention for the development of competences of employees appears to arise when external factors create a necessity for the organisation to invest in learning and training. One of the participants said: “Differences between SMEs in their attention for competence development are caused predominantly by the line of business in which one operates”. The technical and knowledge-intensive organisations are forced by their environment to invest in the development of their employees to stay competitive”. Another participant: “Particularly in the line of business of ICT training and educating employees is very important. In these companies learning on the job is also much more difficult than in for instance a carpenter’s workshop”. Knowledge intensive organisations often have a high amount of higher educated employees. These employees see the importance of personal development and ask the organisation for support in this development. One of the participants mentioned: “Employees with a less high education level often don’t see the necessity of personal development and are satisfied with their situation. These employees do also often give more resistance against changes”. These comments of the participants make clear that SMEs first attention goes to obtaining short-term profits. This focus leaves no time to spend on competence development of employees. An other participant said: “SMEs focus on the practice of every day”. One other participant: “SMEs invest in the transfer of business specific knowledge that cannot be obtained by formal education or training”. One participant: “SMEs are prepared to invest in training and education in case they want to grow or move into an other direction and need an expertise which they don’t have. On the other hand a big group of the SMEs would hire a new person that is an expert on that field”. One of the participants mentioned the influence of company culture on the attention of the SME for competence development of employees: “The company culture or innovation culture is also very important. Our company measures this culture with an innovation-quick scan. This scan also points out whether the entrepreneur is aware of the importance of investment in competence development of employees”. One other participant also mentioned the type of company culture as a cause

for the amount of attention for education and development of employees. An other participant said: "The organisations that do spend time and money on competence development of employees are often the organisations that are forced to do so by their environment that demands of them to innovate".

In summary the participants in the interviews have mentioned several factors that can influence the attention of SMEs for competence development of their employees. The participants mentioned that technical and knowledge intensive SMEs are aware of the importance of competence development. Secondly the amount of higher educated employees can influence the SMEs attention for competence development, because these employees generally ask for this attention. A third factor of influence that was mentioned by the experts was the type of organisation culture or innovation culture of the SME. Another factor of influence that was mentioned by one of the experts was the situation in which an SME wants to explore a new field of expertise and needs education or training to get the expertise that is needed.

4. Causes for the limited attention of SMEs for competence development of employees

All of the participants in the interviews mentioned time and money as the most influential barriers that keep SMEs from investing in the competence development of their employees.

"In bad economic times one has no money for investments in training and education, but in good economic times SMEs have not time to spend on training and education. Next to the daily work one has no time for structural attention for competence development of employees". One of the participants in the interviews mentioned the phenomenon that more and more small companies start working in networks of small companies. This way they can profit of the advantages of their joint scale size. "You see more and more networks of smaller companies arise. This way they combine the advantages of small management with the advantages of scale enlargement". One of the participants in the interviews mentioned the problem of SMEs being "unconsciously incompetent" as one of the main factors that often causes the limited attention of SMEs for competence development of their employees.

An other experts mentioned the fear of SMEs of educating or training employees for their competitors. "Some SMEs are prepared to invest in education or training, but they do find it terrible when this employee leaves the company after a few years. This person has become part of the family and when this person leaves it feels as a betrayal". This expert points out that there is a tension in many SMEs between taking advantage of investment in training or

education and running the risk of losing these employees to their competitors within a short time. This might be one of the reasons why many SMEs choose for an in company training or education with the transfer of company specific knowledge. Another cause for the lack of attention in SMEs for competence development that was mentioned by two of the experts was the lack of long-term vision in SMEs, which draws their attention towards short-term success.

In summary factors that were mentioned by the experts to cause the limited attention of SMEs for competence development were a lack of money, a lack of time, being unconsciously incompetent, the fear of educating for the competitors and a lack of long-term vision.

All of the experts mentioned a lack of time and money as the most influential factors to cause this limited attention in SMEs for competence development.

5. The development of a group of competences that are important for all SMEs

All of the experts agreed that it is possible to create a group of competences that is important for all SMEs, except for one. The participants in the interviews gave examples of competences that are important for all SMEs. They mentioned Independence, Flexibility, Sense of Responsibility, Communication Skills, Client Orientation, Problem solving, Long-term thinking and Sales techniques to be important competences for employees in SMEs. One of the participants emphasized that Independence and a Sense of Responsibility might be the most important competences for employees in SMEs. "The dynamic market in which SMEs operate asks for a great independence to act fast and for heavy responsibilities low in the organisation, so employees can deal fast with the demands of clients". One of the experts who is entrepreneur on an SME himself said: "Being independent and saving yourself is competence number one in our company".

Other competences that were mentioned by the experts to be important for SMEs to develop were Innovative abilities and Long-term vision. The two experts that work at Syntens told about the role of Syntens in stimulating innovative behaviour in SMEs. Syntens is very active in stimulating innovative behaviour in SMEs. One other expert said: "SMEs lack the ability to innovate and to think in a long-term way. One works very hard and meanwhile misses things. There is no time for reflection on working-methods". One of the experts also mentioned a lack of competence in SMEs to recruit the right people. "Many small companies spend little

attention to the creation of the right balance or combination of competences of people in their company. If there is a nice match between the entrepreneur and the applicant, one hardly even looks at the specific competences of this person. This way entrepreneurs often hire people that look like him or her, although this is not necessary the right person for the company”.

In summary competences that were mentioned by the experts to be important for all SMEs were Independence, Flexibility, Sense of Responsibility, Communication Skills, Client Orientation, Problem solving, Innovative Behaviour, Long-term thinking and Sales techniques.

The expert that did not agree on the possibility of the creation of a group of competences that are important for all SMEs, was of opinion that competences in the specific lines of business are more important for SMEs. This expert emphasized that SMEs have no interest in developing only general competences.

6. Is it possible to create a process of continuous learning in SMEs with the help of e-assessment?

All participants in the interview, except for one, share the opinion that it is possible to create a process of continuous learning in SMEs. However, this does take some time. First, the awareness of the importance of competence development should be raised in SMEs. An e-assessment instrument could create this awareness. As one of the experts said: “A lot of the SMEs are unconsciously incompetent and should become consciously incompetent”. An other expert emphasized the importance of stimulating learning behaviour. “You can challenge people by asking them the right questions. Most of the time employees are already aware of their learning needs. It is important to show employees what the goals of the organisation for the future are, so they can picture themselves in this future organisation. That way employees see the role that they should or could fulfil in the future and what competences should be developed to reach the successful filling in of that role”. This expert was however also in the opinion that it is not possible to create a continuous process of learning in SMEs. “It is possible to create a continuous awareness of the importance of competence development, but SMEs have no time to give continuous attention and support to the competence development of employees.”

7. Does the use of ICT in assessment offer a surplus value for SMEs?

The experts particularly mentioned time saving aspect of the use of ICT in assessment as a surplus value for SMEs. One of the experts said: "Assessment in a centre can cause suspicion with employees. Assessment on a computer will probably be seen as less threatening for employees". The experts also named the disadvantages of the use of ICT in assessment. Two of the experts mentioned that a big amount of employees in SMEs have no or limited access to broadband plus limited experience with the use of computers and Internet. In summary the use of ICT for assessment has both advantages as disadvantages according to the opinions of the experts.

8. The demands of the e-assessment instrument for discussion

"The instrument should be usable in all lines of business of SMEs (<250 employees) and it should be usable for all levels of employees in SMEs".

All of the experts agreed on the feasibility of this demand, taking into account the demand that the instrument should test competences in the line of business of the SMEs next to the more general applicable competences. As mentioned before, the experts mentioned that the use of ICT for an assessment is not possible for all employees of SMEs and that the very small SMEs (<10 employees) will probably have not interest in using this instrument.

"The instrument should make an inventory on the learning needs for competence development, followed by a personal development plan. The assessment instrument should also be used during and at the end of the learning process to measure the progress of the employee and to give insight in the learning results".

Half of the experts shared the opinion that it is desirable to use the assessment instrument not only at the start of the learning process, but also during and at the end of the learning process. The others mentioned that there are also other options to test the learning progress of employees. "The assessment of learning progress is needed when competence development is reached by informal learning activities. When the employee is involved in formal learning activities, moments of progress testing are most of the time already part of the program". According to all of the experts, an external, independent person should support the establishment of the personal development plan. Other parties, such as commercial

educators or commercial consultancy agents, could base their advice on the selling of their own product. This is not always the best solution for the employee. "Training or education in a formal way is not always the solution for competence development. Especially in SMEs you should facilitate informal learning". This expert underlines that the outcomes of the e-assessment test should not automatically lead to formal learning solutions.

"The instrument should test competences that are applicable in all lines of businesses. Apart from these generally applicable competences it should be possible for SMEs to extend these competences with competences for their line of business".

All of the experts agreed on this demand for the e-assessment instrument. They even see this extension as a necessity for the instrument to be successful and interesting for SMEs. The experts also agree on the fact that this extension should be with sector specific competences instead of company specific competences. Two of the experts mentioned that personalising the instrument should not cost SMEs too much time and effort. They shared the opinion that the branch organisation could play an important role in the establishment of the competences in the line of business. This could save the SMEs quite some time.

"The assessment should consist of a combination of self-assessment and peer-assessment"

All of the experts saw the advantages of the use of a combination of self-assessment and peer-assessment. However, they also mentioned some things to keep in mind with the use of peer-assessment. This type of assessment was said to take a lot of time, only be reliable if the feedback group is large enough and would not be suitable for a competitive culture. "In case of a competitive company culture, peer-assessment will only be used for personal benefits". The experts also underlined the importance of informing the users on the rules to prevent fear and mistrust. But when all of these remarks are taken into account, this combination of types of assessment will enlarge the reliability of the test, stimulate communication on competences in the organisation and enlarge the insight of the employee in his/her function.

9. Implementation

As described before, the experts see the instrument as a welcome instrument for SMEs, provided that it does not only test general competences but also competences in the specific

line of business of the different SMEs. The experts were also in the opinion that the presentation of the instrument to SMEs should be carried out by an independent, reliable party. Parties that were suggested by the experts to fulfil this role were branch organisations, Chambers of Commerce, banks and accountants. Several experts underlined the importance of evidence of the positive results of the use of the instrument when presenting the instrument to the SMEs. "When the pilot would point out that 80 % of the SMEs is unaware of their arrears on knowledge and skills, this message could make it to the newspapers". An other expert said: "If you can prove that the instrument saves or even makes money, SMEs will be very interested". Three of the experts explicitly dissuaded to use the term e-assessment in the presentation of the instrument. "Don't call it e-assessment and don't talk about learning", one of the experts said. "Once we start explaining people that they have to start learning, the windows shut. You should stimulate learning without making people aware of this stimulation". One other expert said: "Using the work competence can already scare employees in SMEs" "Generally assessments are seen as scary". Several experts also emphasised the importance of good guidance of the use of the instrument. One of the experts even feared that SMEs would take advantage of this instrument: "In case the test shows the lack of competences of an employee, this could give the entrepreneur the permit to discharge this person from his/her function. I think that many of the entrepreneurs that I know would use this instrument in this manner". Ofcourse the statements of this last experts is very alarming. In case the instrument would be used in the way that this expert explains, the instrument would not cause investments in the development of employees, but as an excuse for discharges.

In summary the experts welcome the instrument mainly because of its possibility to raise the awareness of the importance of investment in competence development of employees. Besides this they underline the importance of good guidance on the use of the instrument to prevent a wrong use of the e-assessment. Concerning the presentation of the instrument the experts recommend to make the SMEs acquainted with the instrument with the help of parties that the SMEs are already familiar with. The experts suggested the help of parties such as branch organisations, Chambers of Commerce, banks and accountants. Another issue to consider before introducing SMEs with the instrument is the association that SMEs were said to have with terms like "assessment" and "competences". The experts clearly underlined the consequence of chasing away SMEs and their employees when such terms would be used during the promotion of the instrument.

6. Conclusions from the results of the literature study and the results of the interviews

In this chapter I will describe the similarities and the differences between the results of the literature study and the results of the interviews. I will compare these two sources according to the twelve hypotheses that were mentioned in chapter 2.3. This chapter will make clear for which of these assumptions I have found support and which of these assumptions appear to be incomplete or unfounded according to the results of the research.

6.1. Characterising learning in SMEs

1. The way that employees in SMEs learn can be characterised as predominantly informal and unstructured;

Support for this assumption can be found in both the literature as well as in the interviews with the experts. For instance Admiraal, De Laat, Lockhorst and Rubens (2004) pointed out that SMEs learn mainly in an informal way. SMEs do not relate this type of informal learning to learning. When “learning” is mentioned, they particularly think of formal types of learning (Admiraal et al., 2004). The experts explained that most SMEs search for answers to problems that arise in their near surroundings. In these surroundings employees of SMEs search for answers to their learning needs from resources like the Internet, colleagues or colleagues from other companies. Other sources (formal sources) are only used when the sources in the direct surroundings of the SMEs do not fulfil the learning needs.

6.2. Structuring informal learning

2. Performance of employees in SME's can be improved by structuring informal learning;

The previous paragraph has already pointed out that SMEs learn mainly in an informal way. Admiraal et al. (2004) also underline the importance of structuring informal learning in SMEs in their study. Unfortunately they give no suggestions on how this structuring of informal learning can be carried out. The experts did have some remarks regarding this idea of structuring informal learning. One expert emphasized that you should stimulate informal learning, but not formalize it. “When you structure informal learning, you make it formal”. This expert gave an example of a learning solution that his company had implemented in an

organisation. This example was about an organisation that wanted to refresh their employee's knowledge on safety demands. The expert implemented tests via the e-mail that took the employees 10 minutes every three months. These tests stimulated informal learning in the lobbies. Colleagues started discussions on right answers to the tests. In this example informal learning is structured without formalizing the learning process. Another expert also pointed out the importance of creating facilities by which informal (and formal) learning is stimulated and supported. This expert also underlined the importance of trying to structure informal learning in SMEs, without formalizing unstructured learning needs.

In summary this assumption was supported by the experts, taking into account their remarks. Informal learning should be structured by offering facilities by which informal learning is supported and stimulated. Informal learning should not be structured by formalizing the learning solutions, because individuals should get the opportunity to choose their own learning solution whenever they feel the need of learning. As a result of the above information I define the structuring of learning as offering facilities that support and stimulate learning, without formalising the learning.

6.3. Key competences for employees in SMEs

3. It is possible to compose a set of competences which are important for all SMEs to develop, but apart from these general competences it is important that SMEs have specific competences from their line of business at their disposal to assess;

This assumption has been supported by the literature study as well as by all of the experts. There was only one expert that disagreed on the possibility of composing a set of competences that are important for all SMEs to develop. He underlined that SMEs are in need of competences in their line of business instead of general applicable competences.

Competences that were seen as important for all SMEs by the other experts were independence, flexibility, innovative ability, client orientation, long-term thinking, problem-solving, sales techniques and communication skills. Besides these generally applicable competences, the experts shared the opinion that SMEs should be able to complete the e-assessment with competences from their line of business. Without this supplement the instrument would be much less interesting for the SMEs to use. Two of the experts suggested involving the branch organisation in specifying these competences from the line of business. These two experts explained that SMEs have no interest in spending time on the development of branch specific competences. Offering SMEs to define and elaborate these

competences themselves could keep SMEs from using the e-assessment instrument, they explained.

The study of McLeish (2002) also proved that it is possible to compose a group of competences, which are key competences for employees in SMEs. Her research among Australian employers resulted in a ranking of competences, which those employers labeled as key competences for employees in their companies. The three key competences that were ranked as most important were Problem-solving, Working in teams and Communicating ideas and information. Both the employers in the study of McLeish (2002) as the experts mentioned Problem-solving skills and communication skills as important competences for employees in SMEs. Therefore it would be recommendable to at least assess these competences with the help of the e-assessment instrument.

6.4. Assessment method

4. Peer assessment is a valuable way for SMEs to perform the assessment;

The experts described the peer assessment method as a good way to carry out the assessment because it increases the reliability of the test, because it stimulates the communication on competence development in an organisation and because it increases the insight of the employee of his/her performance. The experts did underline the importance of good guidance in using this type of assessment to prevent mistrust towards colleagues and abuse of the method. Besides advantages, the experts also mentioned the disadvantages of this method. They mentioned the fact that this method costs a lot of time, it would not be useful in a very competitive company culture and it would only be reliable when the group of people involved in the feedback is large enough. In summary the experts did support this assumption, taking into account some important remarks. The use of peer assessment should be dissuaded for companies with a very competitive culture and should only be used after open communication on the procedure.

6.5. Association with the term “assessment”

5. The term “assessment” is associated with judgement and not with development of competences;

This assumption has been supported by all of the experts. They all associated assessment with the judgement of the suitability of the assessed for a job. The experts were familiar with the use of assessment for the selection of personnel, for the promotion of personnel or for the transfer of personnel in case of reorganization. In practice assessment is used most of the time for a selection of personnel to be hired or in case of promotion of personnel. In the available literature assessment is hardly ever used for the development of competences of employees within the company. The Business Snapshot, which was mentioned in the Becta ICT Research (2005), is a rare example of evidence that was found in the literature for the use of assessment for identification of competence gaps in SMEs. Striking was the fact that three of the experts explicitly advised not to use the term assessment in the presentation of the e-assessment instrument to the SMEs. They underlined that this term scares employees of SMEs. Besides not using the term assessment with employees of SMEs, these experts could not give any suggestions on how to take away the fear for assessment. A possible solution for lowering the barrier for the use of e-assessment could be to invite employees to make a voluntary and anonymous test. That way employees can decide for themselves whether they need the help of the organisation in their competence development or not. Of course this solution would exclude the use of peer-assessment and only include self-assessment.

6.6. The role of assessment during the learning process

6. For improvement of development of competences, assessment should be performed several times during the process of development;

In practice assessment is often used only once by each person. This is because assessment is used most of the time for selection of personnel and because assessments are often related to high costs. Only half of the amount of experts supported this assumption. The others were of opinion that there are also others ways of testing the improvements of the competence development. One expert mentioned that testing is often part of formal

programs of training or education. This expert did agree on the importance of repetition of the assessment in case the competences are developed by ways of informal learning.

In summary, this assumption was neither supported nor rejected by a majority of the experts. However, the experts did all agree that a measurement of the progress of competence development is desirable. They only did not agree on the way that this progress should be measured. However, the goal of the assessment is to stimulate competence development in an unconstrained and voluntary way. A repetition of the assessment should therefore be given as an advice to employees, but should stay without any engagement. As explained by the experts in chapter 5.2, point 2, the facilities for learning should be offered but not formalized.

6.7. The use of ICT for assessment

7. The use of ICT for the assessment in SMEs makes assessment more available and useable for SMEs;

This assumption was neither supported nor rejected. The results of the literature study and the results of the interviews with the experts have pointed out that the use of ICT in SMEs can have both positive as well as negative results. The literature has pointed out that the use of ICT for learning is very limited (Admiraal et al., 2004). One of the reasons for this limited use of ICT was the limited access of small firms to broadband and another reason was the limited knowledge and experience of employees in SMEs with the use of computers and the Internet. These limitations could limit the use of the e-assessment instrument by small firms. This limited use of ICT in the smaller SMEs was also mentioned by two of the experts.

However, they also saw the advantages. They all mentioned that the use of ICT for assessment saves time and makes the assessment flexible in use and more accessible.

In summary support for this assumption is found, but this assumption is not applicable to a group of small SMEs with limited access to and knowledge of ICT. However, information from the literature study has shown that this group of small SMEs (<10 employees) covers 92 % of all SMEs (Daelen et al., 2005). In summary the use of ICT for learning in SMEs is very limited, many employees of very small SMEs have limited knowledge, experience and access to computers and broadband. These findings seem to indicate that the e-assessment instrument would exclude quite a large group of SMEs from using this instrument by the use of ICT. However, for the SMEs that do have the knowledge, experience, computers and broadband at one's disposal, the use of ICT for assessment was said to make the instrument

more flexible in use and more accessible. In summary, complete support for this assumption has not been found but the assumption is also not completely untrue.

6.8. Barriers for competence development in SMEs

8. SMEs experience barriers like a lack of time and money, that keep them from investing in learning and training of their employees;

Support for this assumption can be found in both the literature as well as in the interviews with the experts. Lange, Ottens and Taylor (2000) reported four barriers to competence development in SMEs. First they mentioned cultural barriers, related to the attitudes of SMEs towards competence development. Secondly they mentioned financial barriers, related to direct and indirect costs (time) of training and learning. Thirdly they mentioned access and provision barriers, related to the ad hoc way of SMEs to pay attention to learning which limits their time to look for the best solution to solve the problem. Fourthly they mentioned awareness barriers, related to the lack of awareness with the managers of SMEs of the importance and possibilities of competence development. The experts also mentioned the first two barriers that Lange et.al. (2000) mentioned. Besides the lack of time and money for competence development in SMEs, they pointed at the barriers of being unconsciously incompetent and fearing investment in educating for the competitors. Another barrier mentioned by two of the experts was the lack of a long-term vision. This short-term vision was said to keep entrepreneurs from planning time for competence development of employees. The barriers mentioned above make clear that the e-assessment instrument should be offered costless or for a small amount of money and that the assessment should not cost employees of SMEs too much time. Of course an assessment always takes some time, but one could also try to make this time flexible by making an assessment test that can be started, stopped and continued at any time.

6.9. SMEs that do invest in competence development of employees

9. The SMEs that do spend relatively more time and money on competence development are the larger, more substantial companies;

The literature has pointed out that size is the most important variable to influence the use of ICT for learning and training, next to the busy culture of SMEs, which causes a lack of time

for learning and training (Admiraal et al, 2004) (Daelen, Miyata, Op de Beek, Schmitz, Van den Branden, Van Petegem, 2005). However, this variable is related to the use of ICT for learning and training. The experts shared the opinion that size does matter in terms of financial opportunities, however this appeared to be not the only variable that influences the attitude of SMEs towards investments in development of competences. According to the experts this attitude was caused by the existence or absence of a certain necessity. Firstly, knowledge intensive and technical companies are forced by their external environment to invest in the ongoing development of competences. Lange, Ottens and Taylor (2000) confirm this remark in their study. These types of companies were also named “early adopters” in the Becta ICT Research (2005) on the use of e-learning. Admiraal et al. (2004) also found a positive relation in their study between the complexity of the work process and the use of ICT. Secondly, companies with many employees, with a high level of education, are often stimulated to invest in competence development by their employees. Of course, these are often the companies that belong to the earlier mentioned “early adopter”. Thirdly, the type of organisational culture was mentioned as a variable that influences the attitude of companies towards investments in competence development. One of the experts also mentioned that smaller companies have to make a choice between investment in education or training or in hiring new people when they want to go into another direction with their company. The expert pointed out that many of them choose for the second option in case the field of expertise is completely new.

In summary, this assumption appear to be incomplete. Both the interviews with the experts as well as the literature study revealed that size is not the only variable that influences investments in competence development. These investments of SMEs were also mentioned to be influenced by the external environment of SMEs, by the amount of higher educated employees, by the knowledge intensity of the business and by the organisational culture as well. The companies that were described as the companies that do invest in competence development are the companies that will probably be interested in the instrument. These “early adopters” are dominantly found in the service sector (Becta ICT Research, 2004). However, this group is not the target group of the project “E-assessment of learning needs in SMEs”. The partners of this project want to reach the group of SMEs that so far has shown a limited interest in investment in competence development of SMEs. The promotion of the instrument thus should be especially focused on the non-service sector among the SMEs.

6.10. Continuous learning in SMEs

10. An e-assessment instrument aimed at developing competences can stimulate a continues learning process in SMEs.

A process of continues learning is reached when the organisation and its members show a double loop way of learning (Ramondt, 1996). A higher level of continuous learning is reached when a permanent evaluation of actions and choices in the organisation is embedded in the working process. This level of learning can be reached by structuring this evaluation within the organisation. This higher level of learning is called multi loop learning. The participants in the interviews all agree, except for one, that it is possible for SMEs to reach a level of continues learning. The participants in the interviews stated that an e-assessment instrument can give insight in their need for competence development, which can raise the awareness of the importance of investment in competence development of employees. The experts pointed out that many SMEs are not aware of their competence gap. Raising the awareness of the importance of competence development by the use of e-assessment in SMEs could be a first step towards a process of continues learning. One expert did underline that the concept of competence management is not very well developed in SMEs. This means that the e-assesment instrument could be the first acquaintance with competences for some SMEs. Therefore this expert emphasises the importance of providing the instrument with clear information and guidance.

In discussing the results of this research related to assumption five, the Business Snapshot was already mentioned. The pilot of the Small Firms Growth Plan showed that 40 % of the owner managers of the group of SMEs indicated that the training needs identified by the Business Snapshot, were their main reason for training their employees. This example shows that SMEs often need a stimulus to reach a state of awareness of the importance of investment in development of competences. Several of the experts underline the importance of this type of awareness for SMEs. One of the experts mentioned many SMEs are unconsciously incompetent and that the e-assessment instrument could bring SMEs into a stage of being consciously incompetent. This expert underlined the importance of reaching this stage.

In summary, the majority of the experts as well as the example of the Business Snapshot give support for this assumption. Both the results from the literature as well as the results from the interviews with the experts do not exclude that the use of an e-assessment instrument can be a stimulus for SMEs in reaching a continuous learning process. Whether this e-assessment instrument will actually stimulate a process of continuous learning can only be answered after the instrument is really used by SMEs.

6.11. The help of experts

11. SMEs need experts to help them structuring their learning needs after finishing the assessment;

The experts partly supported this assumption. They all agree on the fact that an expert on learning and development should accomplish this role of advising. Some of the experts thought of the advisors of branch organisations to fulfil this role. The experts preferred an independent party for this role, because parties that also have the goal of selling their products might not always give the best advice in the interest of the assessed. However, the second part of the assumption, that mentions the structuring of learning needs, has not been supported by the experts. Two of the experts underlined the importance of offering facilities for employees that make it possible for them to learn in their own way, whenever they want. The independent party that was said to be important to give guidance after the assessment, should, according to the experts, help the employee to understand the outcomes of the assessment. Of course the expert could also play a role assisting the employee in composing his/here personal competence development plan. One should take into account that the experts did underline the importance of leaving the choice for the way of learning (formal/informal etc.) to the employee.

6.12. Requirements for presentation of the instrument

12. To make the SMEs familiar with the e-assessment instrument, the instrument should be presented to them by parties that SMEs are already acquainted with;

The experts gave support for this assumption. The experts recommended parties like the Chamber of Commerce, branch organisations, banks and accountants to make SMEs familiar with the instrument. Two of the experts underlined the importance of showing hard

evidence of the positive results of the instrument. Three of the experts stressed out that the use of the words assessment and competences is likely to cause SMEs to be discouraged to use the instrument. As discussed before, it is very important to pay attention to these remarkable comments. Unfortunately the experts could not give any suggestions on how to name the instrument instead. However, I can imagine that using words like “self-development instrument” or “capacity awareness tool” are less frightening because of their emphasis on development instead of an emphasis on testing or judging.

In summary

The results of the literature study and the interviews with the experts can be summarized into some important conclusions. The way that employees and employers in SMEs learn can be characterised as predominantly informal and unstructured. Admiraal et al. (2004) underlined the importance of structuring informal learning in SMEs. The experts shared the opinion that informal learning should be structured by offering facilities by which informal learning is supported and stimulated and that structuring informal learning should not mean formalizing learning needs. The experts also shared the opinion that a supplement of competences from the line of business to the generally applicable group of competences would be a necessary completion for the e-assessment instrument. Key competences for employees in SMEs that were mentioned both in the literature as well as in the interviews were Problem-solving techniques and Communication skills. Peer assessment was seen by the experts as a good method to perform an e-assessment in SMEs, when this method will be supported by the right information and when the organisational culture of a company is not too competitive. The term “assessment” did appear to be associated with judgement and not with the development of competences. Using this term in presenting the instrument was dissuaded by three of the experts. The experts agreed that the measurement of the progress of competence development after the e-assessment is desirable. Barriers that can keep SMEs from investing in competence development appeared to be a lack of time and money, being unaware of being incompetent and the short-term vision of SMEs. Investments in competence development by SMEs appeared to be influenced by the size, by the external environment, by the amount of higher educated employees, by knowledge intensity of the business involved and by the organisational culture of SMEs. Bringing SMEs into a stage of being consciously incompetent appeared to be an important first step in reaching a process of continuous learning in SMEs, in which the e-assessment instrument could play an important role. The experts all agreed that SMEs need the help of an expert on learning and

development for planning the development of competences after performing the e-assessment. This expert should have no interest in selling learning- or training solutions and was should assist employees in understanding the outcomes of the assessment. Finally, the experts advised to present the e-assessment instrument to the SMEs with the help of parties that SMEs are already acquainted with.

7. Requirements for the design of the e-assessment instrument for SMEs

The results of the literature study and the interviews with the experts have lead to some critical requirements for the design of the e-assessment instrument, which are essential to make a successful use of the instrument in SMEs possible. To be successful the instrument should meet the following requirements:

- ✓ The e-assessment instrument should measure both general applicable competences as well as more specific competences from the lines of business;
- ✓ The e-assessment should have the opportunity to use self-assessment or peer-assessment. It should be possible for SMEs to only apply self-assessment, because peer-assessment cannot be used in case employees want to stay anonymous and is not suited for all organisational cultures;
- ✓ When presenting the e-assessment instrument to the SMEs, the term e-assessment should not be used. The instrument should be promoted with the use of terms that are less associated with testing or judging;
- ✓ The use of the instrument should be guided with supportive information for the SMEs;
- ✓ The results of the e-assessment should be followed by a competence development plan. An expert on learning and development of competences should support this process. This expert should be independent and have no interest in selling learning- or training solutions;
- ✓ The e-assessment should be advised to employees to be repeated during the learning process to measure the progress of competence development;
- ✓ The e-assessment instrument should be presented to the SMEs by parties that SMEs are already acquainted with such as branch organisations, the Chamber of Commerce, banks and accountants;
- ✓ The e-assessment instrument should not be very expensive to use or very time-consuming;

- ✓ A presentation of positive results of the use of the e-assessment instrument should be part of the promotion of the instrument among the SMEs.

8. Discussion

In light of the results and conclusions presented in this thesis, some issues will be discussed in this chapter.

In chapter 2.2. the next research question has been presented to you:

The research question:

“What learning needs do SMEs have and what causes the lack of attention in SMEs for competence development by learning and training? Can an e-assessment instrument stimulate the attention of SMEs for competence development and empower and improve the conditions for continuous learning in SMEs”?

The partners of the project “E-assessment of learning needs in SMEs” have the goal of raising the awareness of the importance of competence development SMEs and to indirectly stimulate the creation of an environment for continuous learning in SMEs.

The experts in this research have described that SMEs are often unaware of their learning needs. This was said to be one of the reasons for the lack of attention among SMEs to invest in competence development. These experts also saw the opportunity of raising the awareness of the importance of competence development among SMEs with the help of the e-assessment instrument that will be developed. So the goal of the project to raise awareness among SMEs on the importance of competence development seems to be feasible.

How about the goal to stimulate the creation of an environment for continuous learning? This type of environment of organizational learning is characterized by the presence of double- or multi-loop learning (Ramondt, 1996). Can these types of learning be stimulated by the use of an e-assessment instrument among employees in SMEs? An e-assessment instrument is stimulating competence development, but does it also stimulate incidental or continuous reflection on existing rules and standards? To my opinion it doesn't when the employee receives no feedback from the organization on his/her results of the assessment. This is what might happen when the assessment stays

anonymous. Therefore, to stimulate the creation of an environment of continuous learning, a certain type of feedback on the assessment should be part of the learning process. The use of peer-assessment was already mentioned and this type of assessment does involve feedback moments for employees. A reflection on existing collective rules and standards is of no use when this is an individual reflection. Facilitating possibilities to discuss these rules and standards appears to be a necessity in creating an environment in which continuous learning is possible. In this type of environment all communication about the e-assessment should be open and non-threatening. Unfortunately the research has pointed out that employees often fear assessments. Besides this, the experts also expressed the expectation that some entrepreneurs might misuse the instrument by using it as an excuse to discharge employees. There thus seem to be still quite some barriers to take before the conditions for continuous learning and an ideal assessment with the focus on development have been reached. Reaching this ideal situation is not impossible, but does take these barriers to overcome.

So far I have concluded that raising the awareness among SMEs on the importance of competence development can be reached with the use of an e-assessment instrument. Secondly, stimulating and empowering an environment for continuous learning in SMEs with the help of the e-assessment instrument is quite hard, but not impossible.

How about reaching the employees that are supposed to use the instrument? The target group of this project are SMEs. This included a large group of companies, of which 92% in Europe consists of companies with ten or less employees (Daelen et al., 2005). In chapter 6.7. I have already mentioned that this group of very small SMEs often have very limited knowledge on and access to ICT and broadband. The partners of this project do strive after developing ICT skills of employees in SMEs by introducing the e-assessment instrument in SMEs, as mentioned in chapter 4.3. But will the instrument eventually also reach this large group of SMEs in which employees knowledge on ICT and their access to broadband is limited? Investments in ICT facilities remain quite expensive. Would a costless or inexpensive e-assessment instrument be reason enough for these SMEs for investment in these facilities? The future results of the project “E-assessment of learning needs in SMEs” will give an answer to this question.

9. Limitations and future research

This research has definitely been limited by the restricted time that was available. This restriction has forced me to look for a panel of experts, which could provide me with the most rich and complete information on SMEs as possible. In case I would have had more time to perform this research, a research among employees and entrepreneurs in SMEs in all of the participating partner countries in this project would have been desirable.

Another limitation that I have come across was the limited amount of research on SMEs connected with competence development, training and learning. Above this, the research that was available was about the entrepreneurs or the organization as a whole. Unfortunately I found hardly any research in which the individual role of employees in SMEs was discussed. Therefore the role of the individual in SMEs has not been discussed as desired, although the first target group of the project are employees of SMEs instead of their organisations or managers.

This research has shown indications for the importance of sector specific competences for employees in SMEs. Therefore future research should aim on exploring the specific key competences of employees in the diverse sectors in SMEs. Empirical research on the exact competence/knowledge gap between SMEs and larger organizations would also be desirable, because this type of research still lacks empirical evidence.

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“E-assessment of learning needs”

Rapportage van de interviews met experts

Pauline Kennis, 27 juli 2005

Inhoudsopgave

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Deelnemer 1: Assessor en adviseur bij Detaché, Total Training Management b.v.

Deze deelnemer is werkzaam in advisering van bedrijven in de proces-industrie. Deze deelnemer neemt hier assessments af om EVC's vast te stellen en om op basis hiervan een opleidings- en/of trainingstraject op te starten. Detaché is ook actief op het gebied van opleiding en training.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

Deze deelnemer neemt zelf assessments af om EVC's vast te stellen bij diverse bedrijven in de procesindustrie. Deze assessments worden gebruikt om vast te stellen welke deelkwalificaties een deelnemer nog moet behalen om een bepaald niveau/functie te bereiken. Uit deze assessment volgt een opleidingsadvies. Het assessment vindt plaats op de werkplek, waarbij ook nog een leidinggevende en een examinerator aanwezig zijn.

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

“In de procesindustrie ontstaat de behoefte aan opleiding vanuit de noodzaak om medewerkers mee te laten ontwikkelen met de technologie. De standaardkwalificaties van VAPRO zijn een fenomeen in de procesindustrie. Men maakt gebruik van opleidingsinstituten wanneer het interne opleidingstraject niet voldoende is. Veel grote organisaties hebben een uitgebreid intern opleidingstraject met meer bedrijfsspecifieke kennisoverdracht. Daarnaast zijn veel bedrijven verplicht om medewerkers over bepaalde kwalificaties te laten beschikken vanuit bepaalde ISO certificeringen (HACCP, veiligheidseisen etc.) De leerbehoefte ontstaat binnen de procesindustrie bij zowel de grotere als de kleinere organisaties vanuit de noodzaak tot het bijhouden van de technologische ontwikkelingen. Binnen de procesindustrie zit het verschil tussen de grote en kleinere organisaties in het wel of niet beschikken over een intern opleidingstraject”.

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

“Binnen de procesindustrie besteedt men wel constant aandacht aan opleiding en training, omdat men wel moet. Voor veel MKB bedrijven is dat natuurlijk niet zo, maar deze deelnemer denkt dat men bijvoorbeeld de kleine bedrijven met minder dan 10 medewerkers nooit zover zullen komen dat ze structureel en bewust aandacht besteden aan opleiding en training. Verschillen in de mate waarin men aandacht heeft voor het belang van ontwikkeling hebben voornamelijk te maken met de soort branche waarin men opereert. Binnen de procesindustrie bestaat de noodzaak om mee te gaan met de technologische ontwikkelingen, maar bij niet alle branches gaan deze ontwikkelingen zo snel en is de noodzaak zo duidelijk aanwezig. In de procesindustrie maakt het opleidingsbeleid wel deel uit van het strategische beleid”.

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

“Vooral door een gebrek aan tijd, de hectiek van alle dag en door een gebrek aan kennis over subsidies voor opleiding van medewerkers (ESF-subsidies en de aftrek van WVA). De WVA aftrek levert per jaar, per werknemer 2400 euro op. ESF zorgt wel voor een enorme papierwinkel”.

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk zijn

“Samenwerken, communicatieve vaardigheden, probleem oplossend vermogen, verkoopkwaliteiten, klantgerichtheid/klantvriendelijkheid, plannen, rapporteren etc. zijn allemaal competenties die voor veel medewerkers en in alle branches belangrijk zijn om te ontwikkelen”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessment?

“Natuurlijk, indien competentieontwikkeling constant in beeld is, maak je al een situatie die continue leren stimuleert. Zo bereik je de bedrijven die geen weet hebben van hun gebrek aan aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers en die door de assessment gaan investeren in de ontwikkeling van hun medewerkers. Er zijn wel branches waarin dit erg moeilijk is, zoals bijvoorbeeld het kleine winkelbedrijf. Het is wel mogelijk in de bedrijven vanaf 10 medewerkers, maar niet in de kleinere”.

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“De kwaliteit van het assessment zou hierdoor wel zeker afnemen. Het kan echter wel voor een grote kostenbesparing zorgen in vergelijking met de gangbare assessment”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- *“Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB(<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”*

“Zoals eerder gezegd, dit is niet haalbaar voor bedrijven onder de 10 medewerkers en ook niet in alle branches welkom/noodzakelijk. Dit soort algemene testen zijn echter niet welkom in alle branches(denk bijvoorbeeld aan de procesindustrie)”.

- *“Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens*

kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen

“De terugkomst van de assessment is noodzakelijk om de focus op de opleiding niet weg te laten zakken”.

- “Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.

“Dit is noodzakelijk om het voor de bedrijven interessant te maken”.

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega's en/of leidinggevenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

Zelf gebruiken ze ook een combinatie. In eerste instantie beoordeelt de kandidaat zichzelf, hierna beoordelen ook de assessor, de leidinggevende en de examiner de kandidaat. Deze vorm van assessment is echter niet geschikt voor alle soorten bedrijven. Indien er al sprake is van open communicatie en indien de spelregels duidelijk uitgelegd worden kan deze vorm van assessment heel goed werken.

I Implementatie

“Zoals eerder gezegd, zitten niet alle branches te wachten op een dergelijk instrument. In de branches waarin men al structureel aandacht besteedt aan opleiding, zal men minder interesse tonen. Hier zijn de opleidingstrajecten vaak al gestandaardiseerd binnen de branche. Kiezen voor onafhankelijke partijen die het instrument aanbieden, waarin men veel vertrouwen heeft is noodzakelijk. Voor de kleinere bedrijven zijn banken, accountants en soms ook brancheverenigingen geschikt als kanaal. Het middelgrote bedrijf bevindt zich vaak al in een bepaald netwerk waarin het instrument automatisch bekend zal worden. Hoge kosten en onbekendheid met het instrument en met subsidiemogelijkheden kunnen het succes van het instrument in de weg staan. Daarnaast zijn er ook nog bedrijven waarin men geen of te weinig toegang heeft tot het Internet. Kleinbedrijven willen ook altijd de opbrengst van hun investering (met name in tijd) terug te kunnen zien”.

Deelnemer 2: Adviseur en directeur van J en C

J en C houdt zich bezig met advisering van startende ondernemers. Deze deelnemer heeft voornamelijk ervaring met advisering van bedrijven met minder dan 50 medewerkers. Deze deelnemer is zelf ook ondernemer binnen het MKB. Bij J en C geeft men voornamelijk de ondernemer zelf trainingen.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

Deze adviseur ziet in zijn omgeving geen voorbeelden van bedrijven in het MKB die assessment gebruiken. Hij ziet assessment eerder weggelegd voor grotere organisaties die de kosten beter kunnen dragen.

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

“Het MKB, vooral starters, heeft behoefte aan administratieve kennis, belastingtechnische kennis, planmatig werken, financieel beheer, strategische planning, marktanalyse. Dus meer opleidingsbehoefte bij het management wat op vaktechnisch gebied erg kundig is, maar wel nog kennis/vaardigheden mist op het gebied van bedrijfsvoering en leiding geven. Deze adviseur wordt ingeschakeld bij de opstart van nieuwe ondernemingen. Soms ook pas bij het ontstaan van problemen. Opleidingsinstituten die worden ingeschakeld worden vooral ingezet voor het verder ontwikkelen van vaktechnische kennis of voor managementtrainingen. Men leert binnen het MKB op ongestructureerde wijze, wanneer het werk er om vraagt. Natuurlijk is deze ongestructureerde wijze van leren niet de meest ideale wijze van leren, maar andere mogelijkheden heeft men vaak niet in het MKB en vooral niet in de kleinere bedrijven. De focus ligt op de praktijk van alle dag”.

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

“In eerste instantie worden er nog geen strategische plannen opgesteld op het gebied van opleiding. Pas wanneer de organisatie groter wordt ontstaat deze behoefte. Ook de branche is erg belangrijk, met name in de IT branche staat opleiding en training van medewerkers centraal. Hier is leren in de praktijk ook veel moeilijker dan in bijvoorbeeld een timmerbedrijf. Het belang van opleiding en training van medewerkers wordt in grote organisaties eerder gezien doordat hier vaak al hoger opgeleide medewerkers werken die meer bezig zijn met employability. Kleine ondernemers hebben de neiging om pas in te grijpen als er problemen ontstaan. Hun lange-termijn visie is vaak nog niet goed ontwikkeld”.

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

“De kosten en het gebrek aan tijd zijn belangrijk, maar het gaat om een combinatie van factoren. De hoge kosten zijn wellicht te beperken door het beter voorlichten op het gebied van subsidiemogelijkheden (Subsidies zijn echter verschillend per gemeente!)”.

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk

“Ik kan alleen wat zeggen over de startende ondernemers en zij hebben vaak onvoldoende kennis van marketing, financieel management en van subsidieaanvraag”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessment?

“Wel mogelijk, maar dan via de brancheorganisaties. (leer-werk plaatsen) Ja, maar het is wel belangrijk om niet in moeilijk taal te spreken. Het instrument moet voor iedereen te begrijpen zijn en woorden als e-assessment schrikken alleen maar af”.

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“De test kan op de werkplek uitgevoerd worden, wanneer er tijd en zin voor is”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- *“Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB(<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”*

“Wel haalbaar, maar niet verstandig. De verschillen in opleidingsniveau en per sector of soort product zijn zo groot dat een algemene set competenties veel mensen in het MKB buitensluit”.

- *“Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen”*

“Aan deze eis kan wel voldaan worden, maar het assessment moet niet te snel weer uitgevoerd worden tijdens het opleidings-/ trainingstraject. Wie de rol van advisering op zich moet nemen is afhankelijk

van het soort bedrijf. Bij lager opgeleide medewerkers kan de rol bij een personeelsfunctionaris of leidinggevende liggen. Bij hoger opgeleide medewerkers zou deze rol bij externe personen moeten liggen. Advisering binnen het eigen bedrijf heeft de voorkeur omdat de kosten zo beperkt blijven”.

- “Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.

“Ja, maar bedrijven zijn niet altijd in staat om hun specifieke competenties te definiëren. Hier zullen zij dus wel hulp bij nodig hebben”.

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega’s en/of leidinggevenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

“Ja, maar het is wel van belang om deze werkwijze vooraf eerste gezamenlijk te bespreken. Als een medewerker zich niet prettig voelt bij deze vorm van assessment is het niet verstandig om deze vorm door te zetten”.

I Implementatie

“In eerste instantie zit men waarschijnlijk niet te wachten op een dergelijk instrument. Daarom is het erg belangrijk om positieve resultaten van het gebruik van deze test te kunnen presenteren. Vooral het MKB wil eerst bewijzen zien voordat men interesse toont. Als je kunt bewijzen dat het instrument geld bespaard of zelfs oplevert, zal men zeer geïnteresseerd zijn. Een andere mogelijkheid om het aantrekkelijk te maken is door er een kwaliteitsnorm/certificaat aan te verbinden”.

Het instrument moet via meerdere kanalen worden aangeboden. Bijvoorbeeld via brancheorganisaties of bijvoorbeeld via de website van het ministerie van economische zaken. Adviseurs worden geassocieerd met hoge kosten. Veel bedrijven staan niet open voor investering in nieuwe ontwikkelingen. Verandering is voor de erg kleine bedrijven moeilijk, dit zou een belemmering kunnen zijn voor het succes van het instrument”

Deelnemer 3: Consultant bij Syntens

Syntens is een onafhankelijke adviesorganisatie die het MKB kosteloos adviseert. Syntens is een initiatief van het Ministerie van Economische Zaken om het innovatieve vermogen van het MKB te vergroten. Deze consultant is voornamelijk werkzaam in de voedingsmiddelenindustrie.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

“De eigen innovatie-quickscan is een soort assessmentinstrument”

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

“Veel MKBers zijn zich niet bewust van hun leerbehoeften”.

Deze adviseur zelf een onderzoek gedaan naar leerbehoeften in de voedingsmiddelenindustrie. Men deelde deze groep in naar marketingkennis, productontwikkeling en innovatiegedrag (early adopters, slow movers etc.). Deze bedrijven werden op deze gebieden beoordeeld door adviseurs van deze bedrijven. Men heeft vervolgens gekeken wat de early adopters onderscheidde van het gemiddelde. “Als er een noodzaak bestaat tot opleiding of training, dus als men intern geen oplossingen meer ziet, schakelt men pas een training/opleidings- instituut in”.

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

“Of een bedrijf structureel aandacht besteed aan ontwikkeling van haar medewerkers is per bedrijf verschillend en is afhankelijk van de instelling van de ondernemer zelf. De verschillen worden ook veroorzaakt door bedrijfsgrootte, maar ook door het opleidingsniveau van de medewerkers. Hoger opgeleiden geven vaak zelf wel aan of zij behoefte hebben aan ontwikkeling van hun kennis/vaardigheden. Ook de bedrijfscultuur/innovatiecultuur is belangrijk. Deze cultuur wordt ook gemeten door de innovatiequickscan. Syntens gebruikt bij haar eerste contacten met een organisatie een basisscan, waarin ook het onderdeel opleiding is opgenomen. Hieruit blijkt of de ondernemer een behoefte ziet aan opleiding van de medewerkers. “Het MKB zou veel meer aandacht moeten besteden aan ontwikkeling van medewerkers en niet alleen maar als de situatie hierom vraagt. Daarbij zouden ze wel wat hulp kunnen gebruiken en e-assessment zou hierbij kunnen helpen. “Over het algemeen maakt een opleidingsbeleid geen deel uit van het strategische beleid van het MKB. Als men er al aandacht aan besteed gaat het vaak om een eenmalig project”.

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

“Geld en tijd zijn heel belangrijk. Daarnaast zijn contacten met de kenniswereld belangrijk. Het onbewust onbekwaam zijn draagt ook bij aan het niet investeren in ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

Het niet weten waaraan men behoefte heeft, ofwel het “onbewust onbekwaam”zijn zorgt eigenlijk voor de grootste barrière.”

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk

“Op het gebied van strategie ontwikkeling/ langetermijn denken en op het gebied van marketing (op managementniveau) zijn de leerbehoeften duidelijk aanwezig. Daarnaast geeft het MKB aan dat er een gebrek is aan vakmensen”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessment?

“Ja, mits men het traject goed begeleid zodat men in een later stadium zelf de regie in handen kan hebben. Daarbij is het belangrijk om het leren leren te activeren en niet alleen individueel, maar ook met elkaar”.

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“Het kan een eerste voet tussen de deur zijn. Als de test niet te lang duurt en het resultaat van de test relevant is, heb je iets om over verder te praten. De feedback op de resultaten zou echter niet via Internet plaats moeten vinden”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- *“Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB(<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”*

“Ja, deze eis is absoluut haalbaar”.

- *“Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen”*

“Indien men minder vooruitgang boekt dan wat men wenst, kan dit demotiverend werken.

Zijn voorkeur voor de persoon van adviseur bij het assessment gaat uit naar een externe persoon. Een personeelsfunctionaris speelt bijvoorbeeld te veel rollen in de organisatie om deze rol op zich te kunnen nemen”.

- “Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.

“Deze aanvulling zou wel welkom zijn. De competentiemeting zou moeten meten in hoeverre een medewerker binnen zijn/haar functie voldoet en zou daarnaast moeten meten in hoeverre deze medewerker aansluit op de strategische doelen van de organisatie”.

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega’s en/of leidinggevenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

“De vraag is of mensen eerlijk zijn in hun antwoorden bij self-assessment. De communicatie rondom de methodiek van peer-assessment is erg belangrijk. De acceptatie van deze werkwijze is ook afhankelijk van de bedrijfscultuur”.

I Implementatie

“Het instrument is zeker welkom. Het bedrijfsleven geeft immers aan dat er een gebrek is aan adequaat opgeleid personeel. Hij ziet brancheverenigingen als de beste ingang tot de MKB bedrijven. Daarnaast zouden ook banken (Rabobank voor het MKB) en Kamers van Koophandel geschikt zijn als ingang tot het MKB. Er moet wel bewijs geleverd worden van de meerwaarde van het gebruik van dit instrument. Een gebrek aan tijd werd al genoemd, en tijd is dus in dit opzicht ook kostbaar. Voorbeelden vanuit de pilot zouden dus zeker noodzakelijk zijn voor overtuiging van het MKB. Als uit de pilot bijvoorbeeld blijkt dat 80% van het MKB niet eens weten dat ze qua kennis zwaar achterlopen, kan dit zelfs de krantenkoppen halen”.

Deelnemer 4: Directeur en adviseur bij PAT Learning Solutions Groep

PAT Learning Solutions adviseert organisaties in veranderingstrajecten en biedt hierbij ondersteunen door middel van training, bedrijfsopleidingen en e-learning oplossingen. Deze leeroplossingen zijn competentiegericht. Deze deelnemer is zelf ook ondernemer binnen het MKB.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

Dit bedrijf is zelf erg actief met e-learning. Men is wel bekend met assessments die zich richten op persoonlijkheidskenmerken. Deze organisatie werkt zelf vooral voor top-500 bedrijven. Dit is puur uit noodzaak, omdat het MKB over het algemeen weinig kan investeren in e-learning. Er zijn wel enkele bedrijven in het MKB als klant, maar deze maken vaak eenmalig gebruik van hun diensten en dit zijn vaak korte interventies. Deze organisatie is veelal actief als begeleider van veranderingstrajecten, waarbij opleiding en training vaak een grote rol speelt.

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

“Bij probleemoplossing ontstaat een leerbehoefte in het MKB, maar ook bij de grotere bedrijven. Wanneer men over voldoende tijd en geld beschikt en wanneer opleiding of training noodzakelijk is, gaat men ook daadwerkelijk wat doen met deze leerbehoefte. Men besteedt niet structureel aandacht aan ontwikkeling van medewerkers, omdat men heeft hier geen tijd voor over naast de dagelijkse werkzaamheden. Op het moment dat je informeel leren gaat sturen, maak je het formeel. Als wij medewerkers gaan uitleggen dat ze moeten gaan leren, gaat de luiken dicht. Wij faciliteren een leersituatie, waarvan men zich niet bewust is. Men is ook bezig met een project waarbij mensen een opfriscursus nodig hebben op het gebied van veiligheid. Hierbij krijgen mensen eens in de drie maanden een toets van 10 minuten. Deze toetsen leiden tot een informele wijze van leren, doordat mensen in de wandelgangen gaan praten over deze vragen om een volgende toets beter te kunnen afronden. Zo stimuleer je leren zonder dat men zich hier echt bewust van is. Je moet een toets niet te zwaar maken, maar wel een status geven”.

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

“De meer kennisintensieve bedrijfjes besteden uit noodzaak meer aandacht aan de ontwikkeling van hun medewerkers, maar vaak zijn deze medewerkers zelf al heel erg actief in hun ontwikkeling. Vaak zijn deze medewerkers ook wat hoger opgeleid dan in het gemiddelde MKB bedrijf”.

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

“Geld, tijd en deskundigheid”. Ook in de eigen organisatie ziet deze directeur geen mogelijkheid om medewerkers constant te ondersteunen in hun leerproces. Hiervoor heeft men geen tijd en men kijkt ook niet erg ver vooruit. “Er heerst duidelijke een “hands-on” mentaliteit. Men is bezig met de omzet van de komende twee maanden. Als je in het MKB vertelt dat men moet gaan leren, zegt men dat alles prima gaat en dat men hier geen behoefte aan heeft”.

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk

“In algemene zin denk ik dat innovatie en het vermogen om te kunnen innoveren en op de langere termijn te denken zaken zijn waarin het MKB capaciteiten mist. Men werkt heel hard en mist ondertussen dingen, tijd voor kritische reflectie ten opzichte van de werkwijze is er niet.

Met name zelfstandigheid en probleemoplossend vermogen zijn erg belangrijk voor medewerkers in het MKB. Indien je niet voldoende over deze competenties beschikt, gaat men op zoek naar iemand anders. Employability wordt steeds belangrijker, ook in het MKB. De verantwoordelijkheid voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers ligt steeds minder bij de ondernemer, maar steeds meer bij de medewerker zelf. Kennisontwikkeling vindt steeds meer via Internet plaats. Er is een stille revolutie gaande die Internet heet. Het grootste probleem met competenties is dat iedereen er wat anders mee bedoelt. Het gebruik van het woord competentie kan een MKB-er al afschrikken”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessment?

“Ja, als je mensen op de juiste manier uitdaagt, door ze de juiste vragen te stellen. Mensen weten vaak heel erg goed op welke vlakken zij zich zouden moeten ontwikkelen om beter te kunnen functioneren. Het is daarbij belangrijk om aan te geven waar men met de organisatie naartoe wil, zodat deze persoon ziet welke rol hij/zij over een tijdje zou moeten/kunnen vervullen. Je ziet wel steeds meer gebeuren dat de missie en de strategie van bedrijven steeds meer deel uit maken van opleidings- of trainingstrajecten. Een continue bewustzijn van het belang van leren is te realiseren, maar het continue aandacht besteden aan ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB is niet mogelijk door het hectische karakter van veel MKB-bedrijven. Men heeft simpelweg geen tijd om constant bezig te zijn met ontwikkeling van medewerkers. E-assessment kan wel een eerste stimulans geven en het bewustzijn van een competentie gebrek in kaart brengen”.

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“Het heeft zeker een meerwaarde, als je het maar geen e-assessment noemt. Deze benaming schrikt af”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- “Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB(<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”

“Het hangt er van af wat je meet. Ik zou me toch eerder op brancheniveau richten en niet op het totale MKB”.

- “Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen”

“Nee, dit moet men zo organiseren om er voor te zorgen dat de focus op ontwikkeling niet wegzakt”.

De rol van advisering zou niet door een opleidingsorganisaties worden ingenomen. Het advies zou dan automatisch in de richting van opleiding gaan, terwijl er wellicht ook andere manieren van ontwikkeling zijn om competenties te ontwikkelen. Het MKB zal ook niet snel investeren in opleiding, tenzij er bepaalde verdienste mee te behalen zijn zoals noodzakelijke certificering en dergelijke. Als het maar aansluit bij een ervaren noodzaak. De rol van advisering zou in ieder geval door iemand ingevuld moeten worden die niet veel geld kost”.

- “Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.

“Ja, maar het moet niet teveel tijd kosten voor het MKB om deze competenties aan te vullen met branchespecifieke competenties. Wellicht is het daarom verstandiger om deze competenties in kaart te brengen met de brancheorganisaties”.

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega's en/of leidinggevenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

“Ja, maar deze vormen van assessment kosten wel ontzettend veel tijd. Tijd die kostbaar is. Het is ook erg belangrijk om te communiceren wat er met de resultaten van het assessment gaat gebeuren”.

I Implementatie

“Met een dergelijk instrument kan men het MKB wakker schudden, dus het is wel degelijk een welkom instrument. Investing in ontwikkeling van medewerkers zal uiteindelijk winst opleveren, maar hiervan wil men wel eerst bewijzen zien voordat men het instrument gaat gebruiken. Het instrument moet aangeboden worden aan ondernemers via de brancheorganisaties of via andere meer onafhankelijke kanalen. Noem het geen e-assessment en heb het niet over leren”. Daarnaast moet het dus niet teveel geld en tijd kosten en moet het niet te algemeen zijn. Ook moet het gebruik van het instrument goed begeleid worden om verkeerd gebruik te voorkomen. Een goede voorlichting, een bruikbare test en harde bewijzen over de resultaten van het gebruik zijn noodzakelijk voor het succes van het instrument”.

Deelnemer 5: Adviseuse bij MKB Adviseurs

MKB Adviseurs komt voort en is gelieerd aan MKB Nederland.

Deze deelnemer neemt zelf assessmenttesten af in het MKB. Op basis van deze assessments brengt zij advies uit richting de ondernemer. Dit advies heeft betrekking op aannames, doorstroom of uitstroom van mensen. Deze testen zijn gericht op het meten van de persoonlijkheid en de intelligentie van de kandidaten.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

Bij MKB adviseurs werkt men zelf met een test die op de computer wordt afgenomen (niet via internet). Dit is een assessment test die gericht is op het meten van persoonlijkheidskenmerken en intelligentie. Deze deelnemer heeft nu 6,5 jaar ervaring met deze assessment test. De test is afkomstig uit Israël en was bedoeld voor mensen die vanuit het leger op zoek waren naar een passende baan. Dit instrument was in eerste instantie dus bedoeld voor uitstroom. Deze test wordt in de regel gebruikt in het traject van werving en selectie bij aannames van personeel. Daarnaast wordt de test ook gebruikt voor doorstroom en in een enkel geval bij uitstroom. De test is bruikbaar voor alle intelligentie/opleidingsniveaus.

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

Vanuit de ervaring van deze deelnemer worden opleidingsbehoeften pas gesignaleerd na uitkomsten van het assessment. "Indien de opleidingsbehoefte niet intern via interne opleiding georganiseerd kan worden en men problemen ervaart in uitvoering van het werk schakelt men een opleidings- of trainingsinstituut in. Een manier om intern op te leiden is "teach the teacher"".

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

"Helaas is men in het MKB vaak te druk bezig met overleven en hard werken om tijd over te houden om te investeren in opleiding en training. Deze deelnemer vindt het erg jammer dat het MKB op deze wijze omgaat met leren. Men investeert niet structureel in opleiding en ontwikkeling. Hierdoor weet men vaak niet welke competenties men in huis heeft en men weet niet welke competenties nog ontwikkeld moeten worden. Daarnaast werkt investering in ontwikkeling en opleiding van medewerkers ook motiverend". Deze deelnemer signaleert niet zozeer verschillen per bedrijfsgrootte of per sector in de mate waarin men aandacht besteedt aan ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB. Deze deelnemer ziet het type bedrijfscultuur eerder als een oorzaak voor het wel of niet besteden van aandacht aan opleiding en ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

Deze deelnemer ziet de kosten als de grootste barrière. Naast de hoge kosten ziet de deelnemer een gebrek aan inzicht in het belang van ontwikkeling van medewerkers als een belangrijke oorzaak. Alle andere barrières zijn in de ogen van de deelnemer overkomelijk. Zelfs de barrière van de hoge kosten is overkomelijk. De ervaring van de deelnemer wijst uit dat veel van de investering in medewerkers wel degelijk geld besparen of zelfs opleveren. De deelnemer doelt dan voornamelijk op investering in het test instrument bij aanneming van personeel.

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk

“Servicegerichtheid, praktische instelling, invoelingsvermogen, verantwoordelijkheidsgevoel, probleemoplossend vermogen, energie, motivatie, intellectuele nieuwsgierigheid (zicht op het bedrijfsproces), stressbestendigheid, flexibiliteit, aanpassingsvermogen en communicatieve vermogens worden door haar allemaal als competenties gezien die voor alle organisaties en veel functies belangrijk zijn. Deze competenties zijn echter voor alle organisaties van belang, niet alleen voor de kleinere”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessment?

“Zeker, het belang hiervan moet echter nog wel duidelijk gemaakt worden. Wederom geldt het belang van bewustzijn van de noodzaak tot investering in ontwikkeling. Doordat dit instrument dat belang van investering in ontwikkeling van medewerkers duidelijk kan maken en daarnaast leeractiviteiten kan stimuleren, is het een eerste stap in de richting van het creëren van een continu leerproces”.

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“Een test via de computer zorgt voor meer vertrouwen in de objectieve uitkomsten van de test”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- *“Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB (<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”*

“Deze eis is wel haalbaar, maar het instrument blijft dan wel erg algemeen. Als het zo algemeen blijft loop je het risico dat MKB bedrijven zichzelf er niet in erkennen en er geen gebruik van maken”.

- “Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen”

“Nee, het volgen van het leertraject is erg belangrijk. Hierdoor weet men of men vooruitgang boekt en dit draagt bij aan de motivatie. Het advies zou gegeven moeten worden door een externe persoon. Dit bewaakt wederom de objectiviteit”.

- “Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.

“Zoals eerder vermeld, blijft de test anders erg algemeen. De mogelijkheid tot aanvulling is zeer wenselijk om een eigen identiteit kwijt te kunnen in het instrument”

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega's en/of leidinggevenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

“Als de groep die mee beoordeelt groot genoeg is, kan deze methode de betrouwbaarheid van de test vergroten. De betrouwbaarheid van de test kan echter ook gewaarborgd worden door een betrouwbaarheidsscore door testvragen te stellen om eerdere antwoorden te toetsen”. Deze deelnemer heeft echter toch problemen met de subjectiviteit van 360 graden feedback.

I Implementatie

“Omdat het instrument inzicht geeft in de noodzaak tot competentieontwikkeling, leiden de uitkomsten van de test het MKB waarschijnlijk naar de trainers, opleiders of adviseurs. Via de test kan men MKB bedrijven bereiken die de noodzaak tot investering in competentieontwikkeling voor die tijd niet zagen”. Deze deelnemer ziet de brancheorganisatie als de aangewezen instantie om het MKB te wijzen op het bestaan van het instrument. “Deze organisatie wekt vertrouwen. Via andere kanalen wordt het instrument wellicht toch als commercieel product gezien, waarbij de kwaliteit op de tweede plaats komt. Daarnaast ziet men het instrument wellicht eerder als belangrijk als het wordt aanbevolen door de brancheorganisatie. Hoge kosten zullen het succes van het instrument in de weg staan. Het

instrument moet gepresenteerd worden door vooral het belang en de positieve werking van het instrument te benadrukken”.

Deelnemer 6: Consultant bij Syntens

Deze deelnemer adviseert ondernemers in het Midden- en Kleinbedrijf op diverse vlakken.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

Deze deelnemer is alleen bekend met assessments waarbij men specifiek naar persoonlijkheidskenmerken kijkt. Hij heeft echter nog zelden meegemaakt dat assessments in het MKB werden gebruikt. Eigenlijk alleen maar bij aanname van hoog geschoold, duur personeel werden wel eens assessmenttesten ingezet.

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

“Een leerbehoefte in het MKB kan voortkomen uit eisen die de klant stelt aan de kwaliteit van het product en/of de medewerkers. Indien men de kennis/vaardigheden niet binnen de organisatie kan verkrijgen/ontwikkelen schakelt men een opleidings- of trainingsorganisatie in. Syntens besteedt zelf heel erg veel aandacht aan stimulering van een continu leerproces in het MKB.

Men richt zich dan op innovatie, ook op sociale innovatie. Sociale innovatie heeft niets met technologie of e-business te maken, maar met het proces hieromheen. Gericht op persoonsgerichte ontwikkeling. Dit is juist waar innovatie begint. Het stimuleren van verder kijken dan je neus lang is, is zeer belangrijk in dit opzicht”.

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

“Men besteedt in het MKB vaak alleen aandacht aan ontwikkeling van medewerkers vanuit een bepaalde noodzaak of vanuit de vraag van medewerkers, maar het zijn toch vaak alleen de hoger opgeleide medewerkers die hierom vragen. Lager opgeleide medewerkers zien niet de noodzaak om zich verder te ontwikkelen en zijn vaak tevreden met hoe het gaat. Zij hebben vaak problemen met verandering. Met name in de technische sector is het bewustzijn van het belang van investering in opleiding en/of training erg hoog. Hier is ook duidelijk een noodzaak aanwezig door een gebrek aan juist geschoold personeel. Hoe kennisintensiever de organisatie, hoe hoger het bewustzijn van de noodzaak tot ontwikkeling van medewerkers. Vaak is het gemiddelde niveau van opleiding hier ook hoger. Over het algemeen maakt opleidingsbeleid geen deel uit van het strategische beleid. Alleen de bedrijven die sterk gericht zijn op innovatie, betrekken opleiding bij hun beleid. Vaak zijn het alleen de bedrijven die vanuit de omgeving gedwongen worden om aandacht aan innovatie te besteden”.

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

“Tijd en geld weerhouden het MKB van ontwikkeling van haar medewerkers. Tijd is wellicht nog wel een grotere barrière dan geld”.

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk

“Om echt te voldoen aan de vraag, zou de test erg beroepsgericht moeten zijn. Alleen verkooptechnieken zijn in alle branches belangrijk. Verder zijn er niet echt leerbehoeften te onderscheiden die je in alle sectoren terugziet”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessment?

Deze deelnemer denkt dat de kennis in het MKB over competentieontwikkeling en assessment nog erg ver achter ligt. “Men vindt assessments over het algemeen maar eng. Daarom is het erg belangrijk om erg duidelijke en voldoende informatie te geven over de testen en het gebruik hiervan. Deze deelnemer denkt ook dat de test door de ondernemer zelf ook op de verkeerde manier gebruikt kan worden.

Indien medewerkers niet aan de norm voldoen, geeft dit de ondernemer de mogelijkheid om deze personen te ontslaan. Om dit te voorkomen is voorlichting dus heel erg belangrijk inclusief een goede begeleiding tijdens het gebruik. Ook is het zo dat niet alle medewerkers al toe zijn aan een assessment. Investering in ontwikkeling heeft alleen maar zin als de medewerker daarvoor open staat. In ieder bedrijf zijn er altijd natuurlijke leiders en volgers. Dit is ook niet erg. Als medewerkers de positieve resultaten van hun collega zien, zullen ook zij uiteindelijk de test gaan gebruiken.

Alles is mogelijk, maar dit kost erg veel tijd en vraagt om een totale cultuuromslag. Deze cultuuromslag begint nu bij de meer kennisintensieve bedrijven, maar zal uiteindelijk ook doordringen in de andere bedrijven. Het MKB is over het algemeen nu eenmaal geen first mover.

Voldoende voorlichting en begeleiding zijn erg belangrijk”.

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“Men kan wanneer men wil tijd steken in de assessment. Maar veel kleine bedrijven hebben geen of weinig computers. Sommige medewerkers hebben überhaupt nog nooit op een computer gewerkt”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- “Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB(<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”

“Op een zeer algemeen instrument zit men niet te wachten. Men wil meer specifieke competenties ontwikkelen”.

- “Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen”

“Het is wenselijk om de test terug te laten komen. Er is immers altijd sprake van een momentopname, deze moet later nogmaals getest worden. Organisatieadviseurs of opleiders zouden de rol van adviseur op zich kunnen nemen. Zij zorgen echter wel voor hoge kosten”.

- “Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.

“Deze aanvulling is noodzakelijk om het instrument interessant te maken voor het MKB”.

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega’s en/of leidinggevendenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

“Ja, om een vertekent beeld te voorkomen. Als er een feedback moment mogelijkheid is, is 360 graden feedback heel wenselijk. Dit bevordert ook de communicatie en vergroot het inzicht van de persoon over zijn eigen functioneren”.

I Implementatie

“Het is wel een welkom instrument, maar een groot deel van het MKB is hier nog lang niet aan toe. (ICT achterstand bijvoorbeeld) De Kamer van Koophandel is zeer geschikt om dit product onder de aandacht te brengen. Hiermee bereik je de totale doelgroep en deze partij wordt ook als betrouwbaar gezien. Het wordt erg moeilijk om de zeer kleine bedrijven te bereiken. De grotere MKBers zitten in netwerken, en zullen vanzelf in aanraking komen met het instrument. Zij zijn ook minder huiverig voor het gebruik hiervan. Daarnaast moet het dus vooral niet te algemeen blijven en herkenbaar zijn.

Een goede voorlichting en begeleiding is daarnaast erg belangrijk om er voor te zorgen dat het instrument op de juiste wijze gebruikt wordt'

Deelnemer 7: Manager bij Innovam

Innovam is de brancheorganisatie voor de automobielenindustrie. Innovam ontwikkelt en biedt continue trainingen, opleidingen en examens voor alle medewerkers in de mobiliteitsbranche. Men geeft technische- en managementtrainingen. Het IBKI (Innovam Branchekwalificatie-instituut) maakt deel uit van de Innovam Groep. Het IBKI biedt alle medewerkers in de mobiliteitsbranche de mogelijkheid zich te kwalificeren voor hun beroep of functie. Voor de juiste kwalificering ontwikkelt het IBKI toetsen en examens aan de hand van kwalificatiedocumenten voor trainingen en beroepsopleidingen die door de mobiliteitsbranche zijn erkend.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

“Innovam gebruikt zelf de competentiecheck en de bedrijfsopleidingenscan”.

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

“De leerbehoeften bestaan vanuit een vraagstuk wat om een oplossing vraagt. Men probeert dergelijke problemen eerst m.b.v. informatie uit de directe omgeving op te lossen. Men maakt dan gebruik van kennis van collega's in de eigen organisatie of zelfs van medewerkers in andere bedrijven.

Ook ontstaat een leerbehoefte bij nieuwe ontwikkelingen in de techniek. Deze leerbehoefte wordt meestal gesignaleerd/gestuurd door de fabrikanten.

Daarnaast kunnen leerbehoeften ontstaan door het verschijnen van nieuwe wettelijke regelingen (vaak gesignaleerd door Innovam) Wanneer men bepaalde problemen vaker tegenkomt of wanneer het probleem niet m.b.v. hulp van collega's etc. kan worden opgelost schakelt met een opleiding- of trainingsinstantie in”.

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

“Het ad hoc leren zal nooit helemaal verdwijnen. Via hun kennisnet heeft Innovam een groepentool ontwikkeld waarin leermeesters (meer dan 5000) kunnen uitwisselen wat hen bezighoudt (dit is een pilot) Hierdoor ontstaat weer een weg van informeel leren en kennisuitwisseling. De scheiding binnen de automobielenindustrie ligt tussen de dealerbedrijven van 1 of meerdere merken (NDA) en de bedrijven met alle merken (ABA). Deze laatste groep heeft geen importeur die informatie levert aan deze bedrijven. Deze groep moet deze informatie via andere kanalen binnenkrijgen”.

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

“Veel bedrijven willen niet opleiden voor de concurrent. Er is geen vaste kennis van de ABA, zij leren vaak op een informele wijze van kennisuitwisseling. Het gebrek aan tijd voor opleiding/training is vooral voor de erg kleine bedrijven een grote barrière”

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk

“Men praat bij Innovam eigenlijk alleen over competenties. Dit is uiteraard een combinatie van kennis en vaardigheden. Deze zijn vertaald naar kwalificatieprofielen. Dit jaar besteedt men bij Innovam veel aandacht aan communicatie, door de functie van de receptionist te belichten. Algemene competenties bestaan al wel (b.v. de lijst van COLO), maar het is wel belangrijk om deze algemene competenties te vertalen naar bedrijfsspecifieke omgevingen/situaties. Samenwerking, klantgerichtheid, plannen, communicatie en rapporteren zijn bijvoorbeeld voor alle bedrijven van belang”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessment?

“Binnen Innovam is men al wel een heel eind op weg naar het creëren van een continu leerproces, met name bij de dealerbedrijven. Bij de ABA bedrijven gebeurt dit nog veel minder. Men streeft hier wel naar”.

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“Kostenbesparing en tijdsbesparing. Men met wel rekening houden met het feit dat niet alle bedrijven in het MKB beschikken over voldoende ICT faciliteiten”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- *“Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB(<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”*

“Deze eis is wel haarbaar, mits het instrument zich wel richt op branchespecifieke competenties”.

- *“Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen”*

“De diverse testen/toetsen die men tijdens een formeel opleidingstraject tegenkomt zullen voldoende inzicht geven in de eisen. Indien men echter een meer informeel leertraject volgt, is een tussentijdse assessment wel gewenst. De persoon die het advies uitbrengt, moet het leerproces opstarten maar daarna moet de organisatie de begeleiding en de communicatie rondom het leertraject zelf oppakken. Deze rol zou bij adviseurs van brancheorganisaties kunnen liggen of bij andere meer onafhankelijke personen”.

- “Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.

“Dit zouden dan branchespecifieke competenties moeten zijn en om deze vast te stellen kan men overleg plegen met de brancheorganisaties die hier over het algemeen wel zicht op hebben. Bedrijfsspecifieke competenties hebben meer met de bedrijfscultuur te maken en deze worden vaak automatisch op een informele wijze overgebracht op nieuwe medewerkers”.

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega's en/of leidinggevenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

“Peer-assessment zorgt er voor dat wensen en verwachtingen uitgesproken worden en is daarom zeer geschikt”.

I Implementatie

“Indien er voldoende brancheherkenning in aanwezig is naast de meer algemeen toepasbare competenties, zal het instrument erg welkom zijn. De rol van de brancheorganisaties kan groot zijn in het presenteren van het instrument aan de doelgroep. Daarnaast zijn er natuurlijk nog meerdere kanalen die men kan gebruiken om bekendheid te geven aan het instrument. Er zijn natuurlijk ook bedrijven die geen gebruik maken van de diensten van de brancheorganisatie of die geen brancheorganisatie hebben.

De test moet herkenbaar zijn, moet aantoonbaar succes opgeleverd hebben en moet niet te veel tijd in beslag nemen om succesvol te zijn”.

Deelnemer 8: Directeur van Memotrainer

Memotrainer ontwerpt webbased cursussen voor scholings- en trainingsinstituten en faciliteert een e-learningplatform. Daarnaast is hij zelf een ondernemer in het MKB.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

“ECDL, het computertijbewijs”.

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

“Kleinere organisaties werken op een probleemoplossende manier. Men gaat zoeken naar kennis op het moment dat men met een probleem zit. In eerste instantie is deze kennis vaak op het Internet te vinden. Het Internet wordt vaak gebruikt wanneer het een kennisgebied betreft waarop men al bekend is. Indien men een geheel nieuw terrein betreedt, is een opleiding/training toch wel gewenst. Indien men wil gaan groeien of een totaal andere richting in wil gaan is men wel bereid om te investeren in opleiding/training. Anderzijds is men dan ook wel geneigd om nieuwe mensen aan te nemen die al over deze kennis/vaardigheden beschikken”

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

“Het leren zou op een andere manier georganiseerd moeten worden. Men moet meer bewust bezig zijn met leren tijdens het normale werkproces. De verschillen in aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers bestaan voornamelijk per sector. Als kenniswerker moet je wel aandacht blijven besteden aan ontwikkeling van medewerkers om bij te blijven. Voor veel kleinere bedrijven is het niet direct noodzakelijk om opleiding deel uit te laten maken van hun strategische. Tenzij ze willen groeien, maar dat wil niet iedereen”

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

“De hoge kosten en het niet direct zien van de opbrengsten van een investering in ontwikkeling van medewerkers. Daarnaast een gebrek aan expertise”.

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk

“Veel kleinere bedrijven besteden er weinig aandacht aan het vinden van de juiste balans/combinatie in hun team op het gebied van persoonlijke kwaliteiten. “Als het goed klikt met een persoon, zit het vaak wel goed. Vaak neem je mensen aan die veel op jezelf lijken”. Veel van deze bedrijven bedenken niet vooraf over welke competenties ze moeten beschikken om succesvol te zijn. Men heeft op dit gebied dus toch geen kijk op de lange termijn. Er bestaan zeker wel algemene competenties die voor

alle organisaties belangrijk zijn. Er bestaan echter geen competenties die voor alle functies van belang zijn, dan krijg je toch een niveaudeling. Communiceren, luisteren, verkooptechnieken etc. zijn hier voorbeelden van”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessmentt?

“Ja, want competentie management zorgt voor een blijvende focus op verbetering. Men is zich wel bewust van het belang van leren/ontwikkeling, maar men komt er niet aan toe omdat men niet weet hoe men dit moet realiseren”.

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“ICT is erg bruikbaar voor assessment door de tijdsbesparing, maar het vervolg op de uitkomst van die assessment zou wel op een persoonlijke wijze uitgewerkt moeten worden in niet via Internet.

Assessment in een center is daarnaast ook een zwaar middel, wat met name voor personeel wat al bij de organisatie werkt, voor argwaan kan zorgen”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- “Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB (<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”

“Ja, maar het ligt er wel aan wat je gaat meten”.

- “Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen”

“Nee, dit is noodzakelijk om er voor te zorgen dat de leerdoelen in beeld blijven. Het assessment zelf hoeft niet noodzakelijk terug te komen, maar een evaluatie van de resultaten wel. Het advies wat volgt op het assessment zou gegeven moeten worden door een externe, onafhankelijke persoon die geen commercieel belang heeft bij dat advies. Training of opleiding via de formele weg is immers niet altijd de oplossing voor competentieontwikkeling. Zeker in het MKB zou je informeel leren moeten faciliteren”.

- “Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.

“Deze mogelijkheid is gewenst, maar richt je dan wel op branchespecifieke competenties in plaats van op bedrijfsspecifieke competenties. Competentiebeoordeling per functie heeft toch nog erg duidelijk het karakter van beoordeling. Als je leren in de organisatie wil bevorderen, moet je dat niet alleen op individueel niveau doen, maar ook binnen bijvoorbeeld teams. Het is niet altijd slecht als iemand een bepaalde competentie minder beheerst dan een andere, indien een ander in het team deze competentie wel heel goed beheerst. Je zou je dan veel meer moeten richten op het in kaart brengen van de noodzakelijke competenties voor het team om vervolgens per medewerker te bekijken of je gezamenlijk over deze competenties beschikt. Zo kies je voor een veel positievere benadering”.

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega’s en/of leidinggevendenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

“Er worden wel vaak politieke spelletjes gespeeld bij 360 graden feedback. Vooral het betrekken van directe collega’s kan averechts werken en zorgen voor een onprettige werksfeer. De werking van deze methode is erg afhankelijk van de bedrijfscultuur. Wanneer er een zeer competitieve sfeer aanwezig is, wordt 360 graden feedback alleen maar misbruikt voor persoonlijk gewin”.

I Implementatie

“Het instrument kan het beste aangeboden worden door een onafhankelijke partij als bijvoorbeeld een brancheorganisatie of een accountant. Men zou dit product bij de presentatie niet moeten voorzien van een benaming met het woord “assessment” er in. Dit wordt te veel geassocieerd met het moeten voldoen aan bepaalde normen. Het instrument moet op een positieve wijze gepresenteerd worden, met de nadruk op persoonlijke ontwikkeling van talenten”.

Deelnemer 9: Manager bij Kenteq

Kenteq is het kenniscentrum voor technisch vakmanschap. Kenteq biedt opleidingen en cursussen, neemt examens af, beoordeeld erkende leerbedrijven etc. Deze deelnemer houdt zich onder andere bezig met de kwalificatiestructuren.

A Kent u voorbeelden van toepassing van assessment of e-assessment in het MKB?"

“Assessment wordt in het MKB zelden gebruikt. Als het gebruikt wordt dan bij selectie van hoog opgeleid, belangrijk personeel”.

B Opleidingsbehoeften/leerbehoeften in het MKB

“Een opleidingsbehoefte wordt meestal gesignaleerd vanuit de motivatie om een oplossing te vinden voor een probleem in de werksituatie. Het leren vanuit probleem oplossing zorgt voor een optimale opname van nieuwe kennis/ vaardigheden. Een tendens is een verschuiving van afspraken op het gebied van arbeidsvoorwaarden van de vakbonden naar het bedrijfsniveau. Dit betekent dat managers op dit gebied ook training nodig hebben om zo afspraken te maken met hun medewerkers over de arbeidsvoorwaarden. Het signaleren van problemen en naar aanleiding daarvan op zoek gaan naar kennis/vaardigheden om deze problemen op te lossen is niet verkeerd. Het niet bieden van gestructureerde faciliteiten om ondersteuning te bieden aan leren n.a.v. signalering van een probleem is echter niet wenselijk. “Men moet niet proberen om het ongestructureerde leren (aan de hand van probleemoplossing) te structureren” “Hiermee bedoel ik dat organisaties medewerkers in de gelegenheid moeten stellen om op probleemoplossende wijze competenties te ontwikkelen” “Dit vraagt om een cultuur waarin men de mogelijkheid heeft om voor een eigen leerwijze te kiezen en waarin het maken van fouten gezien wordt als een leermoment”.

C Aandacht voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers in het MKB

“Er bestaan wel degelijk verschillen in de mate waarin het MKB aandacht besteed aan ontwikkeling van haar medewerkers, met name op het gebied van bedrijfsgrootte. Hoe groter men wordt, hoe meer mogelijkheden men ook heeft om aandacht te besteden aan ontwikkeling van medewerkers (vooral mogelijkheden op het gebied van financiering). Veel kleine bedrijven blijven echter klein. Het is voor veel ondernemers erg moeilijk om de dagelijkse leiding voor een deel uit handen te geven. Als men hier toch op een succesvolle manier in slaagt, komen vraagstukken op het gebied van bijvoorbeeld ontwikkeling van personeel om de hoek kijken. Ook zie je steeds meer netwerken van kleine bedrijven. Zo combineert men de voordelen van klein organiseren met de voordelen van schaalvergroting. Binnen het MKB besteedt men wel degelijk aandacht aan ontwikkeling van

medewerkers, maar dit gebeurt op een natuurlijke, vanuit de situatie gedwongen manier. Grotere bedrijven investeren (in geld) veel in kwalificaties die in de maatschappij van waarde zijn. De kleinere bedrijven investeren meer in bedrijfsspecifieke kennis die niet door middel van opleiding of training verkregen kan worden. De focus van de kleinere bedrijven op de dynamische omgeving, zorgt ook voor een gebrek aan langetermijnvisie. Sommige MKBers zijn wel bereid om te investeren in opleiding/training van hun medewerkers, maar ze vinden het wel verschrikkelijk vervelend als deze medewerkers het bedrijf na een paar jaar weer verlaten. Deze persoon is dan eigenlijk toch een soort lid van de familie geworden”.

D Oorzaken voor verminderde aandacht van het MKB voor ontwikkeling van medewerkers.

“Tijd, geld en een gebrek aan langetermijnvisie weerhouden het MKB van investering in ontwikkeling van medewerkers. Over het algemeen heeft men geen tijd in het MKB om op structurele wijze aandacht te besteden aan opleiding en training. Bij slechte perioden heeft men geen geld om hierin te investeren en bij goede tijden heeft men geen tijd om hieraan te besteden”.

E De ontwikkeling van een set competenties die voor het totale MKB belangrijk is

“De vraag is of de kleinere bedrijven niet veel grotere leerbehoeften hebben dan de grotere bedrijven. Zij bevinden zich namelijk in een veel dynamischere omgeving. In alle bedrijven neemt het belang van eigen verantwoordelijkheid voor de eigen ontwikkeling (employability) toe. Ook voor het MKB geldt dat medewerkers niet zouden moeten wachten op een aanbod van de organisatie tot investering in de ontwikkeling van deze medewerkers. Men gaat steeds meer richting een eigen verantwoordelijkheid voor de eigen ontwikkeling. Dit zelforganiserende vermogen is dan ook erg belangrijk. Daarnaast komen verantwoordelijkheden steeds lager in organisaties te liggen. De dynamische markt, waarin men snel moet handelen, vraagt om grotere verantwoordelijkheden laag in de organisatie om snel in te kunnen spelen op de vraagkant. Deze verantwoordelijkheid wordt ook wel in teams gezien”.

Er zijn zeker wel leerbehoeften te onderscheiden die niet sectorspecifiek zijn. Per sector zijn er ook verschillen in de mate waarin men toegang heeft tot Internet en dus tot het gebruik van e-assessment. Competenties die men in alle sectoren nodig heeft zijn bijvoorbeeld samenwerken, klantvriendelijkheid, plannen, communicatieve vaardigheden, rapportage vaardigheden etc.”.

F Is het mogelijk om een proces van continue leren te creëren binnen het MKB middel e-assessment?

“Ja, een blijvende focus op competentieontwikkeling zal op den duur onderdeel worden van de organisatiecultuur. Het is belangrijk om faciliteiten te bieden die oplossingsgericht leren ondersteunen.

Met behulp van e-assessment kan men een bepaald bewustzijn creëren over de leerbehoeften en het belang van competentieontwikkeling”

G Levert een gebruik van ICT voor assessment een meerwaarde of juist niet?

“Kostenbesparing en tijdsbesparing”.

H De eisen aan het instrument ter discussie

- *“Het instrument moet inzetbaar zijn in alle sectoren van het MKB(<250 medewerkers) en het moet inzetbaar zijn voor medewerkers op alle niveaus”*

“Deze eis is wel haalbaar”.

- *“Het instrument moet de aanwezige en gewenste competenties kunnen meten, waarna een opleidings- of trainingsadvies volgt. Gedurende het leerproces moet het instrument vervolgens kunnen worden ingezet om de voortgang te meten van competentieontwikkeling en om het uiteindelijke leerresultaat in kaart te brengen”*

“Als men in het opleidingsplan goede afspraken maakt over de manier waarop men competenties gaat ontwikkelen, is een vervolg op het assessment wellicht niet noodzakelijk. Men kan dit bijvoorbeeld doen door een soort van portfolio opdrachten te plannen en uitvoeren. De resultaten hiervan kunnen ook al een verbetering van een bepaalde competentie laten zien. Een goede coaching is hierbij erg belangrijk. De rol van advisering moet ingenomen worden door een min of meer onafhankelijke partij. Een opleidingscentra bijvoorbeeld, zal het advies altijd afstemmen op haar aanbod”.

- *“Het instrument moet competenties meten die van toepassing zijn in alle bedrijfssectoren. Daarnaast moet het instrument de mogelijkheid voor het MKB hebben om de standaard van competentiebeoordeling per functie aan te geven en om het instrument uit te breiden met bedrijfsspecifieke of sectorspecifieke competenties”.*

“Men heeft zeker behoefte aan deze aanvulling. Het formuleren van de bedrijfsspecifieke competenties moet echter wel ondersteund worden, omdat dit niet zo gemakkelijk is. De vraag is ook of de formulering van deze competenties op het niveau van het management moet liggen of dat ook medewerkers of teams van medewerkers hierbij betrokken moeten worden. Het is belangrijk om medewerkers te betrekken bij de formulering van deze competenties door ze zicht te geven op de

strategische doelen voor de toekomst. Daarnaast is het belangrijk om een onderscheid te maken tussen de niveaus waarop men bepaalde competenties zou moeten beheersen”.

- “Naast self-assessment zou het instrument ook gebruik moeten maken van peer-assessment, waarbij collega’s en/of leidinggevenden ook een oordeel geven over de competenties van de desbetreffende persoon”.

“Ja, peer-assessment is een gewenste aanvulling op het self-assessment”.

I Implementatie

“Het instrument is wellicht niet welkom voor het totale MKB. De brancheorganisatie zou de rol op zich moeten nemen om het instrument te presenteren aan het MKB. Deze organisaties hebben vaak het vertrouwen van de ondernemers. Andere partijen worden toch vaak als collega-ondernemers gezien, die hun advies afstemmen op hun eigen aanbod van producten. Het moet een persoonlijk instrument worden, het bedrijf moet hun in een eigen jasje kunnen gieten. Het moet dus niet te algemeen blijven. Het moet ook niet gepresenteerd worden als de ultieme oplossing, maar ook de beperkingen van het instrument moeten ook genoemd worden”.