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German-Style Apprenticeships Simply Can't Be Replicated

Half of young Germans enter vocational training, and the rigid labor market relies on certification.



A welder apprentice at a training center in Cologne, Germany, 2016. PHOTO: OLIVER BERG/ZUMA PRESS

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Say the words “apprenticeship program,” as the Trump administration has been doing recently, and maybe you imagine a win-win: Young people welcomed by companies that want to train them to become skilled workers.

Some American policy makers have begun to see Germany’s approach—credited with helping it navigate the 2008 recession while keeping youth unemployment in the single digits—as the magic formula. But adapting the German system for the U.S. is little more than a dream.

Over half of young Germans enter apprenticeships, which can lead to certification in more than 300 different careers. Many are blue-collar jobs ranging from construction to baking, but apprenticeships also cover white-collar fields like information technology and engineering.

An apprenticeship generally involves two to three years of work and study after secondary school. In Germany’s “dual system,” apprentices work on the job for three or four days a week and spend the rest of the time in academic instruction paid for by the government. This setup has been shown to ease a student’s transition into work. Openings in apprenticeships are based on employers’ demands for workers, and youths who’ve earned a vocational certificate are readily hireable.

But this comes at a cost. Workers enter the job market with skills that often become obsolete as industries change. The early-career advantage is offset by disadvantages later in life. Research shows that after age 50 German workers with general education do better than vocationally trained ones, many of whom leave the workforce.

Germany and the European Union recognize the need to retrain people whose earlier skills become obsolete. There are continuous calls for “lifelong learning.” Unfortunately, governments have not figured out effective ways to retrain older workers, and companies often don’t see the advantage of doing so. Training over the course of a career is significantly more prevalent among workers with a general education.

Moreover, the U.S. cannot quickly replicate Germany’s deep history of apprenticeships. The German system builds on a half-century of employer experience, on national standards, and on a relatively rigid labor market that relies on certification as a hiring credential.

By contrast the U.S. has retreated from vocational education. In high schools, it has morphed into an alternative way to teach basic skills such as math and reading and to motivate students not doing well in the general curriculum. The move toward broad standards and accountability via test scores hasn’t helped vocational education either.

Community colleges might provide something like the mixture of education and training found in the German system, but they have not developed serious relationships with industry. The construction trades have found some success with apprenticeships, but this has not been replicated for white-collar jobs. And skill certification is much less important in the U.S. labor market than in the German market.

Even if the U.S. succeeded in expanding apprenticeships, the problem of skill obsolescence remains. The American model of providing vocational training to those who do not like or do not do well in the general curriculum does not augur well for adaptation when new skills are required.

Employers like the idea of vocational training because it could reduce the demands on them to train new workers. But when the skills they need change, they also may find it easier simply to return to the entry-level market rather than retrain their existing workforce.

The largest problem of skills in the U.S. today isn’t a shortage of young workers with specific competencies. Instead it is a need for more general cognitive skills that give workers the ability to adapt to new circumstances and new jobs. In that area, American schools are not competitive with their international competitors—and more apprenticeships won’t help.

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