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Skills problems are Europe-wide

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Despite the outlook of a slowing economy, the skills shortage is still a prevailing challenge in Central Europe, especially technical personnel. According to a survey conducted by Ernst & Young, 83% of Austrian companies have problems finding suitably-qualified employees. While the industry is lobbying for increasing migration quota for qualified persons, labour representatives are campaigning against an increased influx of foreign workers.

The only long-term solution, in my opinion, is training and education.

Especially for production and technical jobs, vocational training or apprenticeship is a well-established tradition in Austria. The vocational

training system provides solid on- and off-the-job training for young people in hundreds of clearly defined occupations. Now is the time to modernise this system and make it more attractive to both employers and apprentices. There should be more flexibility and a longer perspective – such as access to higher education – for apprentices.

For the companies which provide such vocational training, there should be even more incentives. In co-operation with a national training institute, NKE last year set up a workshop for apprentices to offer more than 50 training places for the metal industry. This will certainly help to secure the long-term availability of skilled workers, for our own company as well as for other companies in the region.

In terms of higher education, shorter and more practical degree courses offered by the Universities of Applied Sciences (Fachhochschulen) are getting more popular. Instead of six to eight years of studying at traditional universities, one can get a first degree after three years, similar to the Anglo-Saxon system.

In the past few years, NKE has been working with local and regional Universities of Applied Sciences on different projects. We also offer opportunities for internships and degree theses to the students. These graduates have become indispensable driving forces in the company's operation and management.

As a fast-growing enterprise in Steyr, a small, traditional but highly industrialised city, NKE, together with the Austrian government and other partners, is endeavouring to tackle the skills shortage in the region. ■

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