
ECONOMICS

*Sociology***Franck Bailly***Université de Rouen, CREAM**France**E-mail: franck.bailly@univ-rouen.fr**Received: January, 2012**1st Revision: February, 2012**Accepted: April, 2012***VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND THE
DEMANDS OF WORK: A
CONVENTION-BASED ANALYSIS**

ABSTRACT. Vocational training is a matter of considerable importance in developed countries. Attempts to evaluate the influence of this type of training on individuals' ability to enter the world of work have formed the basis of a number of largely empirical and quantitative studies in the economics of education and training. For all that, few analyses have sought to understand the decisions taken by economic agents, which are what is really at work behind the statistics. Thus the aim of the present article is to reveal the role recruiters' attitudes play in determining individuals' entry into the world of work. We emphasise the importance of recruiters' beliefs about the origins of the qualities people display at work. We compare those recruiters who believe that these qualities can be acquired through training and education with those who believe that they cannot be so acquired and are an almost innate part of individuals' make-up.

JEL Classification: J2, B5, I2 **Keywords:** economics of education and training, vocational training, France.

Introduction

Vocational training courses in France have long been adapted to the requirements of the workplace (Troger and Ruano-Borbalan, 2009). However, the content of current courses reflects specific debates about the nature of the competences that are now required. For example, should those competences be regarded as part of an individual's make-up or do they depend rather on the nature of the work and firm in question, or even on the family? Similarly, are they to be regarded as acquired solely in the education system or in the workplace (cf., for example, Bailly, Léné, Toutin, 2009; Lichtenbreger, 2007; Combes, 2002)? These debates on what is to be understood by the term 'competence' are reminiscent to some extent of those on skill that characterised the 1950s (Lallement, 2007). They have been fuelled by the growing importance of the service sector in the developed economies and the ensuing rise to prominence of so-called 'soft' skills (Bailly and Léné, 2012) that now extends to manufacturing activities, which are increasingly acquiring a service dimension.

The present paper seeks to examine the question of competence from a different viewpoint. Following on from earlier studies, it takes as its starting point the notion that the output of the education and training system, and hence competences, can be analysed as a social construct or convention (Poulain, 2001). It follows from this that particular attention

should be paid to actors' judgements as the means by which this convention is given expression. We place particular emphasis on the judgements and conventions of recruiters and attempt to reveal the representations and beliefs that underlie them which, to the best of our knowledge, have been all too seldom analysed. More specifically, we emphasise the importance of recruiters' representations and beliefs as to the origins of the qualities people display at work. In particular, we aim to compare those recruiters who believe that these qualities can be acquired through training and education and those who, on the contrary, believe that they cannot be so acquired and are, in other words, an almost innate part of individuals' make-up.

One of the consequences of conceptualising the output of the education and training system, and therefore competences, as conventions and analysing the conventions governing recruiters' judgements is to put into context the self-evident character, or 'naturalness', of their assessments of vocational training courses, even if, for the agents involved in the situations, those conventions seem '*in the present moment, to be presuppositions whose origins in social conditions tend to be forgotten*' (Dupuy *et al.*, 1989, p. 145). In other words, alternative conventions, possibly employed by different actors, could be regarded, a priori, as equally valid. Thus there is a certain similarity between the convention-based approach we adopt here and those studies that seek to 'denaturalise' the dominant concepts of competence, as the studies by Hampton and Junor (2009, 2010) seem to us to do in the case of Australia. Although we focus our analysis on the representations of recruiters, we do so not because their point of view should be regarded as more legitimate than those of other economic agents but rather because their representations and beliefs, as reflected in their recruitment practices, influence trainees' entry into the labour market and hence evaluations of the output of the education and training system, probably to a greater degree than the representations and beliefs of many other economic agents.

1. Vocational training and entry into the world of work: method and empirical material

Economists use various empirical investigative methods to evaluate the influence of initial vocational training on entry into the world of work. The most favoured methods are still quantitative ones, but the discipline is beginning tentatively to embrace qualitative approaches.

1.1. The various methods of empirical investigation

The economics of education emerged as a distinct field of enquiry in the 1960s in the USA (Eicher, 1990; Blaug, 1985; Teixeira, 2000; Teixeira, 2005; De Meulemeester and Diebolt, 2004). At a very early stage, economists became interested in vocational training and its link with employment, which they began to investigate using the quantitative methods that were standard in the profession. Thus at the beginning of the 1970s, Hu *et al.* (1971), for example, using US data, showed that young people leaving vocational training programmes (provided in vocational high schools) tended to enter the labour market under more favourable conditions in terms of wages, time spent in jobs and time required to obtain their first job than their counterparts who had completed the more general programmes provided in comprehensive high schools. Schriver and Bowlby (1972), on the other hand, using data for Tennessee, concluded that completion of a vocational training programme did not significantly influence the earnings distribution. The methods used in these early studies are characteristic of the empirical investigations carried out in subsequent decades into the influence of vocational training on integration into the world of work, and in particular into the transition between school and work (Ryan, 2001). Improved econometric techniques and

the availability of a greater number of more detailed databases probably explain this development. Technically, the method usually consists of comparing the (dependent) variables relating to labour market entry that are to be explained with the (independent) explanatory variables relating to individual characteristics, training programme completed etc., and testing the significance of the latter's influence over the former. The task of the economist is then to interpret the results and see them as a reflection of the behaviour of economic agents. As a result, the direct explanations for their behaviour that economic agents might advance – in this case concerning the recruitment of individuals who have completed initial vocational training programmes – are ignored.

Although they still rely on quantitative techniques, other studies, fewer in number, have attempted to uncover these explanations by means of questionnaires, in which various items selected by the (economist) investigator are listed for the respondents to choose from. This is the method adopted by Lee (1986), for example, in order to identify the recruitment criteria that recruiters consider most relevant. The survey he carried out among privately and publicly owned companies in Malaysia highlighted the prevalence of experience (private sector), knowledge of languages and qualifications (public sector). Recruiters also believed that the role of university education was primarily to develop the ability to think; they did not regard the transmission of work-related knowledge as a priority. From the same point of view, Hill (1989) concentrated his analysis specifically on recruiters' assessments of training. It was based on a sample of 188 companies in Pennsylvania and compared post-secondary technical education and high-school diplomas. According to the recruiters questioned, employees who had completed post-secondary technical education were considered to be more effective workers than others after recruitment. For some jobs, the recruiters also believed that employees with this type of education required less settling-in and training time than more experienced workers.

The last method of empirical investigation used by economists is based on interviews. This method is commonly used in the social sciences, particularly in sociology and management sciences, but must less so in economics. The few studies that have used it (Blinder, 1990; Blinder and Choi, 1990; Bewley, 1995, 2002; Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal, 1997; Moss and Tilly, 1995; Piore, 2004) have been concerned with the functioning of the labour market or price and wage rigidity, but have not tackled the question of vocational training and its link with employment.

1.2. The advantages of a qualitative, interview-based approach

The advantages put forward by economists in justification of an interview-based approach are not, strictly speaking, grounded in epistemology, even though epistemological considerations are touched upon from time to time. More simply, the arguments they advance arise out of concrete concerns related to their research work. They see the interview-based approach as having three main advantages. Firstly, interviews can be a means of bringing out new ideas not yet discussed in the literature, which can then be modelled and tested by the standard quantitative methods. Secondly, the interviews can be used to 'correct' or 'adapt' existing theories. After all, economic models are underpinned by a complex set of hypotheses. When they are not corroborated, it is not easy for theoreticians to identify which of the hypotheses in the set require modification and to propose alternatives. Interviews provide economic agents with an opportunity to express their point of view (which theory seeks to model) and hence make it possible to identify the faulty hypotheses and to propose replacements. Finally, interviews are a means of supplementing the use of quantitative methods and comparing theory and empirics. This is particularly relevant when there are no quantitative data.

Over and above these advantages, which are traditionally put forward by way of justification by users of this method, interviews also seem to us to be an excellent way of penetrating the black box of the decision-making process actually at work. They have the advantage over the questionnaire method of being able to make use of open-ended questions, which enable agents to express themselves freely and to bring to light the beliefs or representations underlying their decisions (Schwartz, 1987). It is for this reason that we adopted the interview method.

1.3. Recruiters' beliefs and judgements and the functioning of the labour market

Economic analysis, or at least the dominant school thereof, has developed on the basis of an approach that Orléan (2002) characterises as 'fundamentalist', in that the behaviour of economic agents is considered to be influenced only by the basic economic variables – individual preferences, production technologies, resources – which consequently leaves little room for beliefs or representations in analyses of behaviour. Since its very beginnings, education economics has adopted a 'fundamentalist' approach of this kind (Bailly and Chatel, 1999, 2004). The output of the education system, particularly with regard to labour market entry, is traditionally considered by economists of education as a thing or substance whose characteristics can be objectively identified. Such an approach has also almost naturally led them to exclude the judgements of economic agents and the cognitive frameworks that shape them from their analyses. This substance is defined as increased productivity for human capital theorists (Becker, 1962, 1964), information on applicants' qualities on recruitment in the traditional version of signalling theory (Spence, 1973) and filter theory or, for the radical American economists, a socialisation process better attuned to firms' requirements (Bowles and Gintis, 1975).

The economics of conventions seeks to break with this fundamentalist tradition by emphasising the importance of representations and beliefs for the decisions taken by economic agents (Orléan, 2002). With regard to the output of the education system and, more particularly, competences, this means that the information imparted by educational qualifications has no meaning in itself. It is only when embedded in a system of representations and beliefs that it takes on any meaning and becomes useful to recruiters, who are then able to interpret that information. As Eymard-Duvernay and Marchal (2007, p. 12) note: '*no competence exists prior to the judgement and nor is it just waiting to be discovered: the judgement in fact contributes to the formation of the competence*'. In other words, educational output and competences are not a substance but rather what is evaluated as such (Bailly and Chatel, 2006 ; Chatel, 2001); they are conventions that are given expression in these judgements or evaluations.

To reject a substantialist concept of competences and to emphasise that they are actually conventions means that there may potentially be conventions other than those that exist at a given moment in time and that become established in the actors' eyes simply because they are there (Salais, 1989). In concrete terms, this means that the recruiters' conventions should not be regarded as 'natural', for example during discussions on these questions with the other social partners, whose point of view is, a priori, equally legitimate. The introduction of a plurality of conceptions also means that those recruiters closest to the ground are able to make judgements on vocational training courses and adopt conventions that are not necessarily in accordance with those formulated upstream and in a more institutional way by the firms involved in developing the curricula, as is the case with the training courses investigated here (even though these firms operate in the same sector). Thus our approach is similar to that adopted in disciplines other than economics, typically industrial

relations, that question the dominant representations of competence (cf., for example, the studies by Hampton and Junor, 2009, 2010).

Nevertheless, we know of few economic studies that have sought to document empirically what these beliefs are. This article is an attempt to fill that gap.

1.4. The empirical material and its characteristics

Adopting the perspective outlined above, our empirical study seeks to understand what these beliefs and representations are and to analyse their consequences. More specifically, we have focused on recruiters' beliefs. It would have been equally legitimate, as has already been noted, to analyse those of other agents (employees, teachers, etc.), but recruiters' beliefs seem to us to be particularly important for understanding the functioning of the labour market, particularly with regard to recruitment and career trajectories. Given the high share of service-sector employment in the developed countries – it accounts for almost 75% of total employment (Gadrey, 2003) – our analysis focuses on French firms in the service sector, more specifically accountancy firms and large-scale retailers, and on the vocational training programmes that provide training for the relevant occupations, namely the vocational *baccalauréat* with specialisations in accountancy and commerce. We chose to investigate vocational programmes because they are often said, at least within France, to be more effective than general programmes at facilitating entry into the world of work for those who complete them. The subject of the interviews was young people who had completed vocational programmes, whether they had been offered jobs or completed placements in the firm in question. The interviewees, who for convenience's sake we will call 'recruiters', were those individuals within the company who had been responsible for the students and/or been involved in the recruitment process. The semi-structured interviews took place at the interviewees' workplaces and lasted between one and two hours depending on the interviewees. The recruiters were questioned about the ability of the training programmes, and what is taught in them, to meet the demands students and/or new recruits face in the workplace¹. More than 30 interviews were conducted, by the author, in 2002/2003 and 2005/2007. The complete interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. These interviews were subjected first to longitudinal and then cross-sectional analysis. This enabled us to identify, as it were by induction, a certain number of themes that cropped up repeatedly in the interviews and around which the analysis could be organised. More specifically, it is clear from these interviews, extracts from which are reproduced here by way of illustration, that recruiters' judgements of the vocational training these young people have received revolve around two main concerns. The first is the nature of the qualities that have to be deployed at work, while the second is the origin of those qualities. We will analyse them in succession. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, while one may not agree with the recruiters' assessments as revealed in the course of the interviews or share the beliefs that underlie them, they do have to be taken seriously, it seems to us, since they shape their decision-making and influence the functioning of the labour market.

2. The qualities of individuals at work

Recruiters' assessments of the ability of the vocational training programmes under investigation (namely the *baccalauréats* in accountancy and commerce) to facilitate integration into the world of work and thus to meet the demands of work depend, firstly, on

¹ For more detail on the interview protocols and the list of recruiters interviewed see Bailly (2004) and Bailly et al. (2008).

the qualities employees are expected to have. From this point of view, the interviews with recruiters are structured recurrently around two dimensions. Their relative importance differs depending on the sector in question and seems to us to be directly dependent on what, in the recruiters' view, is the origin of the qualities individuals are expected to display.

2.1. Recruiters' notions of quality at work: four archetypes

The first dimension which, in the recruiters' discourse, characterises the qualities employees are required to deploy at work is, on the face of it, the one of most immediate concern to economists: the most valuable worker is the one who, from a technical (including relational) point of view, does their work properly. Several studies have attempted to identify these qualities. We will not revisit them here (Gadrey, 1991; Moati, 2001; Combes, 2002; Ughetto, 2002; Gadrey *et al.*, 2003). But over and above this first dimension, our interviews also reveal the importance of the commitment that is required of employees. In concrete terms, this commitment can take various forms: flexibility, overtime, ability to take the initiative, inquisitiveness, for example. The attention recruiters pay to this aspect is linked to its consequences for productivity, as studies based on the notion of effort incentive typically emphasise (Cahuc and Zylberberg, 2004). Upstream of the work process itself, however, it emerges from the interviews that the importance of commitment must also be seen in the context of the symbolic value attached to work. Since, according to the recruiters, work has value in its own right, it must also be a source of pride and commitment, for employees as well as for themselves. This view is expressed particularly strongly when recruiters are criticising young people for their lack of commitment: *'The young people we recruit nowadays, they're not prepared to make sacrifices, I must make myself clear, they're not willing to sacrifice their lives to their work. (...) Now of course, according to everything one hears, there's no longer any acknowledgement of the value of work itself, so there's no longer any real pride (...). The older generations had pride in their work, but not the younger ones'* (Mr M, firm of chartered accountants). Similarly: *'Now that the 35-hour week has been introduced, it's very clear that young job applicants are looking mainly for a wage rather than a job. In the past, work had its own value, but now for young people it's primarily a means of earning their living'* (Mme MP, hypermarket).

As *Figure 1* shows, four archetypes representing the qualities deployed by individuals at work can be identified, depending on the relative strength of these two dimensions (technical competence and commitment). We denote them by the following terms: 'the apprentice', 'the person without quality', 'the worker' and 'the robot'. Let us describe them in greater detail. For the apprentice, technical competence is something that is still being acquired. However, despite its imperfections, his work is of importance to him and is a source of commitment. For the 'person without quality', technical competence is also imperfect, but unlike the apprentice it is not accompanied by commitment. The worker, who can be regarded as the recruiter's ideal employee, is characterised by both technical competence and a high level of commitment, reflecting the importance he attaches to work. For the 'robot', finally, work is done properly but it does not elicit any particular commitment on the employee's part. This represents the routine behaviour of the typical employee.

These four archetypes are defined solely on the basis of the recruiters' minimum expectations. Thus the lack of commitment that characterises the 'robot' or the 'person without quality' does not mean that the individuals in questions are not committed to work. In fact, these individuals are committed to their work, at least to a certain extent, and the recruiters recognise that this is the case. However, the degree of commitment does not match the recruiters' expectations who, in turn, attribute these qualities to them.

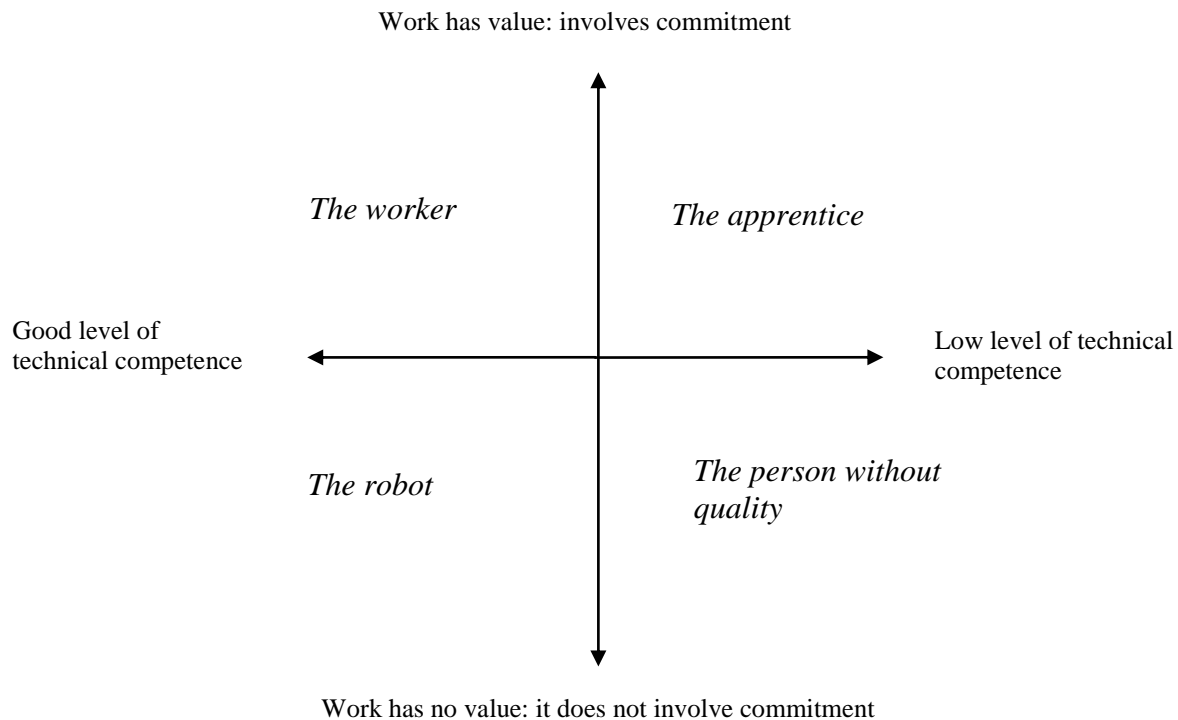


Figure 1. The quality archetypes

2.2. *The qualities deployed at work and the importance of training programme content*

The two dimensions that define the four quality archetypes are found in all the interviews. However, their relative importance varies depending on the sector under investigation, which in turn causes recruiters to view the training programmes and their contents differently.

In the accounting professions, an absence of inquisitiveness or desire to commit to work is of course sometimes criticised by recruiters, just as the ability to take the initiative is recognised and appreciated. However, they place particular weight on the technical demands of the profession and a connection is made between these demands and the content of the training programmes. This leads recruiters in the accountancy profession to recognise the qualities of the training new recruits have received and to point to several weaknesses. While they seem, in the recruiters' view, to acquire some of the basic principles of accountancy, inadequacies in both oral and written language skills, a lack of understanding of the logic that connects the various parts of a set of accounts, which is a consequence of the computerisation of tasks, and a lack of general knowledge are also emphasised. Although this is not the place to revisit our entire analysis of the recruiters' discourse for all four archetypes (Bailly, 2004), we can, by way of example, cite what Mme H, a chartered accountant, said about the inadequacies of a young woman with a *baccalauréat* in accountancy who, despite her shortcomings, could be compared to the archetype of the 'apprentice' by virtue of her commitment: *'That's their major weakness in terms of writing (...). For example, putting together a set of accounts, it's not just a task, it's not just a question of entering items on to a spreadsheet, it requires logic and being clear in one's head, and that's where she needs training. But in fact they lack the ability to think, in general terms, they lack the ability to think'*. On the other hand, Mr KP, a chartered accountant, talking about the training received by colleagues whom he associates with the archetype of the worker: *'In concrete terms what they know how to do best is what they've been trained to do at school, namely basic*

accountancy, they're perfectly capable of doing that'. The connection that recruiters in the accountancy profession make between the technical aspect of the work and the contents of the training programmes sometimes encourages them to suggest ways in which the teaching might be improved. Thus they would prefer the case studies used in class to be closer to the actual situations encountered in accountancy firms. Conversely, they would like certain excessively complex notions in management to be abandoned, since the trainees will have little opportunity to put them into practice. They are also in favour of extending the time students spend gaining practical experience in firms, since they believe that the placements they currently do are too short to enable them to follow a set of accounts in its entirety. They would also like to see improvements in new recruits' knowledge of the principles of work organisation.

The findings for large-scale retailing are quite different. Here, the recruiters are more concerned with the commitment displayed by young people who have completed these training programmes. The actual contents of the programmes are not much discussed and no connection is made between what is taught and the technical aspect of work. Without revisiting all the archetypes here either (Bailly, 2004), a few examples can be cited. Thus Mme L, manager of a fabrics department in a hypermarket, criticises the lack of maturity (and commitment) displayed during her placement by a young girl who, with her lack of technical competence as well, embodies the archetype of the individual without quality: *'Honestly, I have enormous difficulties making her understand that she's an adult, that she's an employee, that she has to explain herself to me and that she has to be here. I find they're too much like kids. They've got no motivation when they arrive and they're very dependent'*. Another example is provided by Mr D, a checkout manager, who highlights the lack of commitment displayed by these young recruits, despite their technical competence, which leads him to liken them to the robot archetype: *'Most of the time, those who've completed a vocational baccalauréat don't have this notion of a career, it's difficult for them. When they come to us after they leave school, all they want is a job. They don't really have any vision of the industry and of the career prospects available to them'*.

2.3. Training, qualities deployed at work and career trajectories

The importance that some recruiters attach to the technical dimension of work and others to commitment does not simply influence their assessments of the training received and of the ability of its contents to meet the immediate demands of the workplace. It also shapes their ideas about the organisation of career trajectories, which differ for each of the archetypes described above, and the role training plays in them.

In large-scale retailing, individuals' desire to succeed is declared by recruiters to be the basic requirement for establishing a career: *'retailing is still one of the areas ... where qualifications don't matter very much ... sometimes it's better to have someone who has less qualifications but who is... dynamic, motivated because you know that type's going to develop and get on'* (Mr L). Thus these recruiters cite numerous examples of individuals who began on the lowest rungs of the ladder and ultimately made their way to the highest positions. *'What was he doing before? When he began he was pushing the trolleys, now he's a manager'* (Mme RP). In large-scale retailing, therefore, it is enough, so it is said, to have the desire in order to be able to advance up the career ladder. The importance of this desire in building a career is the dynamic corollary of the commitment that is required of employees in their work. It opens up opportunities for the worker and apprentice archetypes, who display commitment, to build careers for themselves, in contrast to the other two archetypes (robot, man without quality), neither of whom commits themselves to their work.

The emphasis recruiters in the accountancy profession place on the technical dimension of work and the contents of the training programmes is reflected in the organisation of career trajectories. This is evidenced by the profession's attachment to internal promotion and the availability of opportunities for in-service training, regardless of age, leading to the award of the qualifications that can lead to chartered accountant status. This is the trajectory followed by Mme K, for example, who is now a chartered accountant but began her career with just a CAP (*certificat d'aptitude professionnelle*, a lower level vocational qualification). Further illustration is provided by Mr KP, also a chartered accountant, and his remarks addressed to young women who had passed the *baccalauréat*: *'Afterwards, if you want to devote yourself to your professional life, continue to take exams, show us some evidence that you're putting some effort in, the best evidence is not just to do your work and to do it well but also to throw yourself into studying for the professional exams. There's absolutely nothing standing in the way of them developing their careers'*. However, while training is an unavoidable part of career development, it is also its main weakness. During our interviews, the recruiters drew attention to the risk of inadequate knowledge and hence of a failure to progress up the career ladder; depending on the archetypes in question, the problem is due to increased technical demands and/or the content of what is taught. Thus the young people studying for the *baccalauréat* who do their placements with Mr M, a chartered accountant, and who carry out routine bookkeeping operations that place them in the 'robot' category will not, in his view, have any long-term future in accountancy firms: *'Colleagues who do bookkeeping, I'd say that in three years, in three or four years, that'll be it (...). So if they don't progress, and if we don't try to make them progress, they'll simply disappear from the market, that's what I think'*. Most client firms are computerised and perform these basic operations themselves. On the other hand, they are asking their accountants to provide more sophisticated analytical and consultancy services, which young people with just the *baccalauréat* will find difficult. For their part, those in the apprentice category, unlike their counterparts in the 'robot' category mentioned above, do at least have the possibility of developing careers for themselves, since in that category quality is constantly evolving. Before such careers become a reality, however, they may be brought to a standstill or constrained by a lack of knowledge. This, it seems to us, is what emerges from the interviews when the recruiters criticise the lack of general education, organisation or overall grasp of the general principles of accountancy that characterise the training received in the vocational *lycées* and which are consequences of the computerisation of accounting operations. The worker category, for its part, may also have potential for career development, but progress is dependent, at the very least, on knowledge being updated or increased in an environment in which it changes rapidly: *'Our profession is based on accounting, fiscal and social rules that are constantly changing, so there's no alternative but to be permanently updating one's knowledge, constantly training and informing oneself'* (Mr L). Finally, as in large-scale retailing, the 'without quality' archetype has no future in the accountancy profession.

3. The origin of individual qualities and the role of the training and education system

The importance that recruiters attach to commitment and technical competence and the connection they do or do not make with the contents of the training programmes should, it seems to us, be set alongside their views on the origin of the qualities people deploy in the workplace. It is clear from the interviews that their views on this matter can be divided into two opposing categories: for some, these qualities can be acquired through learning, for others, they are innate. Nevertheless, these beliefs are not set in stone. There are several indications that lead us to suppose that they can change.

3.1. Innateness vs. acquisition through learning

In large-scale retailing, the qualities required by recruiters have their origin in characteristics they regard as innate. The recruiters allude to them in our interviews by using terms such as ‘sensibility’, temperament’ or ‘being suited to retailing’, which tends to locate them outside of any learning process: *‘it’s a little bit, if the person is resourceful, if he’s got retailing in his blood’* (Mr DE) or *‘I mean that can’t be learnt, know what I mean, you have to have it in you’* (Mr R).

This does not mean that the work contains no elements that are regarded as technical or that there are no learning processes that have to be gone through. There are certainly learning processes. The recruiters acknowledge this, but in their view they ensue from these innate qualities and successful learning reflects the possession of those qualities. If an individual can manage his department properly, if he can manage his stock or reserves correctly, it is because he has business sense, because he was born to do the job: *‘And then there’s something innate...some people just like to keep their departments nice, put nice facings on the shelves, stick the labels on just so’* (Mme FR.). Thus for large retail recruiters, the role played by the school system is a secondary one. It can even be dispensed with: *‘(...) I don’t give a damn about his academic abilities, whether he might get into university, his level of education, as I was saying just now. I can see everything of interest to me about his school career in his CV, after that it’s his personal qualities’* (Mr D).

The prevalence of this attitude is undoubtedly not unconnected with the relational and representational aspects of work involving direct customer contact and which here, in the recruiters’ pithy turns of phrase, are reduced to innate characteristics. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this attitude has less resonance in certain departments in large retail stores that might be described as more ‘traditional’, such as butchery. In this case, the work necessarily involves a learning process² and requires a certain expertise that is the basis of the qualities deployed in the workplace, which makes these jobs closer in this respect to those in accountancy: *‘I’d say that butchery is a relatively closed trade actually. To be a butcher, you have to be a butcher. (...) It’s easier to train people to work in the drinks or grocery departments than to train them to work on the butchery counter, in the delicatessen, on the fish counter or in the bakery, where you need people who are real professionals’*³» (Mr LR).

As far as the chartered accountants are concerned, the required qualities are not considered to be already present. They are acquired, since people can change. This notion is expressed in several ways in the interviews with the recruiters. It can be observed, firstly, in the importance attached to the formal education and training system (initial and continuing), which is recognised as playing a fundamental role in the construction of the required qualities. Beyond that, the belief that these qualities can be acquired is reflected in the attention the recruiters pay to actual professional practice which, through an experience effect, is seen as a possible source of change for individuals: *‘Just because he (holder of the baccalauréat on a placement) had some weaknesses, that doesn’t mean he can’t change. You know I always say that experience is the sum of the mistakes you’ve been allowed to make’* (Mr C). In contrast to large-scale retailing, therefore, the qualities are not present prior to the learning processes; rather it is the learning processes that precede the development of the qualities. Finally, it should be noted that some of the qualities required in the accountancy profession are fairly similar to those required in retailing, particularly those linked to the relational dimension.

² At least for the traditional part of the department. Another part of the butchery department is self-service. The work here involves packaging the meat and stacking it on the shelves and does not require any butchery training.

³ Ill-fated attempts to deploy non-butchers in this department or the establishment of their own butcher’s shop by former employees can also be interpreted as manifestations of this professionalism.

Now the chartered accountants might well have considered these qualities to be inherent to individuals and thus incapable of being acquired through learning. In fact, however, they do not seem to regard them as being explicitly innate '*you need some business sense, it's true that it's not innate. So it's extremely rare to find someone who's a good salesman in accounting, quite simply because it would purely and simply require a qualification in marketing*' (Mr LN).

3.2. The qualities that are expected and their origin

As far as recruiters' beliefs about the origin of the qualities deployed at work are concerned, some clearly emphasise commitment, as already noted above, while others stress technical competence in conjunction with the content of the training programmes. After all, when recruiters believe that the required qualities can be acquired through learning, as is the case with the chartered accountants, commitment is necessary. Nevertheless, it is not a sufficient guarantee that individuals will have the qualities demanded of them at work or that they will develop professionally. The ability to do one's work properly depends on upstream learning processes, particularly at school – since people can change – and hence on the content of the education/training received, which is the reason for the recruiters' astute and well-argued observations on curriculum content. Conversely, when recruiters believe the required qualities to be innate, as is the case in large-scale retailing, good performance at work and career development are dependent primarily on the exploitation of pre-existing qualities, that is on individuals' commitment and desire for success. Learning processes, including those that take place in school, are no guarantee that individuals will have the qualities required in workplace, since their origin is believed to lie elsewhere. As a result, the content of the curriculum is seldom discussed.

At a more macroeconomic level, the data produced by Cereq and Dares confirm the relative importance attached to the education and training system and to formal qualifications in each sector. There is indeed a higher share of employees without formal qualifications in the distribution sector than in accountancy, with figures of 32% and 7% respectively for the period 2000-2002 according to Cereq. The range of specialisms, which is greater in large-scale retailing than in accountancy, is another illustration of this. According to figures collected by Dares for the period 1998-2002, 21 per cent of young people under 30 with formal qualifications employed in the checkout and shelf-stacker jobs that are a frequent destination for young people competing the training programmes under investigation here specialised in business and commerce in high school, whereas 70% of those in accountancy jobs specialised in accountancy. Finally, the lack of importance attached to formal qualifications in the collective agreements covering the distribution sector analysed by Gadrey *et al.* (2003) provides further evidence on this point.

3.3. The evolution of beliefs in the origin of the qualities

Recruiters' judgements, and the beliefs and representations underlying them, are not set in stone. Conventions can be called into question (Dupuy *et al.*, 1989; Salais, 1989). There are several reasons to suppose that they may change, at least to some extent. Thus in the case of large-scale retailing, Moati (2001) suggests that increased customer contact, greater use of sales techniques and the increasing technical complexity of products should raise the level of learning and knowledge required to work effectively and efficiently, thereby obliging recruiters to attach greater importance to training. There are also grounds for supposing that the current recruitment of young people who have completed business programmes in vocational high school (which will be further strengthened by the developments outlined

above), and who will be recruiters themselves in future, will not be without consequences for recognition of the role of training and formal qualifications. In accountancy, changes in back-office activities (the area in which holders of the baccalauréat tend to be concentrated) towards increased contact with others seem to be taking place (Liaroutzos and Mériot, 1995). These changes concern relations with customers, of course, but also with colleagues (Liaroutzos and Mériot, 1996). A change of this kind, which would strengthen the relational dimension of accountancy work, may lead to changes in recruiters' views on the origin of the qualities their employees need to deploy in the workplace.

Conclusion

Traditionally, empirical studies in economics that have sought to assess the output of education and training systems and, more particularly, the influence of vocational training on entry into the world of work seem to have forgotten to take into account the points of view expressed directly by economic agents. Their judgements on the training received and the cognitive frameworks underlying them have not generally been investigated. Following on from a still fairly small number of other economic studies, and more particularly from the so-called economics of conventions school, we have carried out an interview-based qualitative study with the aim of analysing these judgements, and more specifically those made by recruiters on the training received by young recruits.

One of the main implications of the perspective we have adopted is that no evaluation of training courses can be based solely on the judgements made by recruiters. Other evaluations are both possible and legitimate, including for example those that might be made by workers or their representatives or those of teachers. This is a particularly important point to make, since recruiters are involved in the development of training programmes and, in the labour market, pay those who complete them. However, '*when individuals are guided by different representations of the world, conflicts blow up when different models of evaluation confront each other*' (Batifoulier *et al.*, 2002, p. 3). The dominant model depends on power relations (Gadrey, 2001), in this case power relations in the labour market and questions around the sharing of value added. We have focused on the points of view expressed by recruiters because '*firms' ability to shape their environment makes them a privileged locus for identifying conventions*' (Batifoulier *et al.*, 2002, p. 3).

Our analysis is not without its limitations of course. For example, service sub-sectors other than those investigated would be worthy of analysis in future from the point of view adopted here. The same applies to manufacturing industry, particularly since the service dimension is becoming increasingly important in that sector. Similarly, we have concentrated here specifically on the evaluation of vocational training courses. Further research needs to be carried out in with a view to analysing qualitatively the ability of general education courses to meet the needs of the workplace. All such extensions of the present analysis would put our results into perspective, enabling us to qualify or confirm them. In the meantime, let us hope, as Orléan (2002) invites us to, that our results will help to encourage economists to attach greater empirical importance than they have seen fit to do hitherto to the points of view of agents, to the cognitive frameworks that influence them and to the ways in which those frameworks are formed.

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