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Cultivating Learning Cultures: Building Trust With Apprentices in a Swiss Telecommunications Company

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Abstract

Context: In Switzerland, about two-thirds of young people start dual vocational education and training (VET) at around 15 years of age. Research shows that they are challenged in many ways during this phase of their lives and are therefore particularly vulnerable. Thus, supporting the transition of apprentices from school to the workplace environment requires careful attention. Trust is predicated upon the individual's willingness to be vulnerable, and as such enterprises which offer VET to young learners must consider how they structure trust-building processes into their learning cultures.

Method: A case study approach was adopted to investigate apprenticeship provision in the largest telecommunications company in Switzerland. Over the course of one year, 24 semi-structured interviews and observations were conducted with apprentices, coaches and managers. The qualitative data were processed through condensation, building categories and paraphrasing, by following Bohnsack's *formulative interpretation method*.

Findings: The initial investigation of the learning culture within the company found that a cooperative culture of trust is crucial for educational success. In this context, the way relationships were formed in the workplace was particularly significant. Expressed through

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constructive feedback and *error culture*, learners were supported to take risks and learn from their mistakes. Active participation was also highly valued, leading to a felt sense of recognition and belonging to the organisation.

Conclusion: Trustful relationships within the apprenticeship proved to be a foundational conviction in the company, and while it must be noted that trust is not the sole predictor of success in VET, the learning culture facilitated by trust-building processes afforded opportunities for apprentices to take ownership of their own learning, through negotiated outcomes; leading to creative autonomy and contributions that were to the benefit of the enterprise.

Keywords: Culture of Trust, Innovation, Learning Culture, Vocational Education and Training, VET, Case Study

1 Introduction

> *I think you win the apprentices when they feel that you are really interested in them. And then they give you their trust back. (20180305_1Coach, Pos. 64)*

In times characterized by global uncertainties and risks, the issue of building and maintaining trust in an organization gains prominence (Misztal, 1996). The business environment is changing at a rapid pace, as evidenced, among other things, by strong technological change. The relationship between the world of work and education is also in a constant state of flux due to demographic, cultural, social or economic developments (Gonon & Tipplet, 2016). The culture of a company, and with it the culture of learning and trust, must continuously adapt. Young people who choose to pursue VET routes after compulsory school, who are often integrated into the world of work as young as 15 years of age (Lauper & De Boni, 2011), must navigate this uncertain terrain. Therefore, organisations must be mindful that at this point of life, young people entering VET are particularly vulnerable and it is when navigating the liminal space between education and work, particularly in the context of significant social and economic change, that the decision of what or whom to trust becomes important. Companies, therefore, have a duty to pay close attention to workplace culture to support young apprentices as they transition into professional life.

The everyday life of young people who start an apprenticeship after compulsory schooling changes abruptly. They must adapt to a new daily rhythm, have new teachers, trainers, and peers and are exposed to the double burden of work and school. At this age, various challenging emotional, social, biological and cognitive processes take place (Dreher & Dreher, 1985). However, this phase of development also presents an opportunity for identity development (Dreher & Dreher, 1985; Erikson, 1959; Havighurst, 1972), and among other things, the chance to strengthen their self-concept (Lauper & De Boni, 2011). Möllering (2013) views

trust as a psychological process of 'becoming'; that in navigating our intersubjective relationship to others is necessarily bound up with identity. Therefore, in the context of the workplace, successful integration requires trust-based pedagogical support that supports positive professional identity development (Cichy et al., 2011; Erikson, 1959).

Drawing upon the results of an explorative case study that aimed to investigate how learning cultures were cultivated within one of the largest telecommunications companies in Switzerland, this article examines in more detail one of the key findings that emerged from this larger study: the role of trust as essential for apprentices' motivation to learn. In conducting a deeper analysis of the ways in which trust relationships were constructed, we illustrate the central importance of a lived culture of trust to the success of VET in the enterprise. Our analysis was guided by the following question: *What structural/cultural conditions are required to build and maintain trust in apprentice/mentor relationships in the context of VET?*

As a result, three central themes emerged from our analysis:

1. Effective relationship management
2. The cultivation of an *error culture*, in which apprentices were supported to take risks and learn from their mistakes
3. Opportunities for apprentices to shape their own learning pathway by working in different projects and taking personal initiative.

In the following sections, our analysis is presented and framed by a deep engagement with the theoretical literature on trust as we aim to foreground its centrality to the learning and development of apprentices as they navigate the professional culture of the organisation.

2 Theoretical Background: Conceptualising Learning Culture in VET

VET is an integral part of the Swiss education system, according to the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI, 2022) and Switzerland has an exceptionally high share of youth participating in firm-based apprenticeships (Kuhn et al., 2022). VET enjoys high recognition as it offers practical entry into the world of work, while at the same time providing numerous opportunities for advancement (Gonon, 2013). A recent report by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO, 2020), Switzerland has one of the lowest percentages of youth unemployment. VET grants integration into society and the labour market for young people who would otherwise not find a connection (Gonon, 2013). The attitude of Swiss society towards VET is positive and there is a tendency to prefer VET over academic

education (Cattaneo & Wolter, 2016). The vast majority (approx. 64%) of all school leavers start some form of VET after compulsory school (Kuhn et al., 2022). This contrasts with other European countries, such as the UK, where VET has a comparatively low status in relation to more 'academic' trajectories into universities (Terry & Orr, 2024), and where relations between VET providers, employers and government have been characterised by tension and low trust relations (Donovan, 2019; Donovan & Hautz, 2024). Therefore, where research on trust exists in VET, there are limited examples of how trust is scaffolded with learners in the sector, especially in the context of apprenticeship provision.

The long tradition of VET in Switzerland contributes to the reproduction of the country's social norms and values with respect to the VET system (e.g., Aepli et al., 2021; Bonoli & Schweri, 2019; Bonoli & Gonon, 2022; Kuhn et al., 2022; Muehlemann & Wolter, 2011). The training companies receive a high level of support from society and are trusted by the government. It is this basis of shared cultural norms that could go some way to explain how learning cultures based on trust can be constructed within Swiss training providers. Instability is the enemy of trust culture (Sztompka, 1999), while a consistent commitment to a set of shared cultural norms or values, as is the case with the Swiss apprenticeship system, can produce what Sztompka (1999) has referred to as 'normative coherence'. In more recent work, Sztompka (2019) further contends that such normative coherence depends upon the extent to which 'moral space' is observed and respected. These bonds, namely *trust, loyalty, reciprocity, solidarity, respect* and *justice*, are the ingredients that support the reproduction of trust in stable societies. People who trust tend to believe in a common culture (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010), which allows them to see our fate as shared. It is this idea of 'shared fate', supported by perceptions of fairness, that allows trust cultures to thrive (Uslaner, 2002). It is therefore important to acknowledge how these social conditions can impact upon how structures support the cultivation of trust.

On the interpersonal micro-level, however, trust also plays an important role. VET involves interactions between apprentices, their supervisors, and other employees of an enterprise. Developing a culture of trust between apprentices and other employees is not simple, as it is characterised by a complex network of relationships of asymmetry and dependency (Pongratz, 2003, cited in Misamer & Thies, 2017). Young people entering vocational training are a part of this interdependent relationship. Therefore, how VET is structured determines the extent to which they are protected against social uncertainties, such as unemployment and changes within industry.

The increasing demand for highly qualified employees shows how important high-quality VET is (Barabasch & Keller, 2020; Gonon & Tippelt, 2016). The pressure to innovate is particularly strong in the IT sector, as the number of new companies rise. The IT industry is largely impacted by technical developments, which is accompanied by constant pressure to adapt (Scholl, 2017). In almost all sectors, there are increasing competence and qualification

requirements and the demand for skilled workers is rising (Hähn & Ratermann-Busse, 2020). In the process of building a culture of trust within enterprises, there are opportunities for learners to be socialised in the company in such a way that allows them to learn how to proactively cope with such challenges. Therefore, there is an onus upon VET providers to innovate and change accordingly, and a company's culture of trust can be decisive for its successful management.

2.1 Learning Culture in the Context of an Enterprise

A culture can be understood as a system of values, norms of behaviour, as well as ways of thinking and acting, which have been accepted and learned by a group of people. Belonging to a culture clearly distinguishes a social group from others (Bate, 1984; Sathe, 1983; Tichy, 1982). The description of a culture is always a snapshot of a current situation, in the sense that cultures dynamically interact with the environment and are prone to change (Wagner et al., 2001). This is particularly relevant to corporate cultures, which are highly subject to external influences, such as market conditions and environmental requirements. It is a specific organisational form of culture, which can be defined as "[...] the shared values, norms, traditions or artefacts and behaviours that influence how corporate members act" (Felden et al., 2019, p. 44). The culture within an enterprise in turn is divided into various subcultures, of which the learning culture is one (Wagner et al., 2001).

In parallel to the corporate culture, the corporate *learning culture* is constantly being formed. The learning culture helps the individual to navigate the community (Ai-Tzu, 2015). A learning culture both reflects and shapes dispositions, actions and interpretations of participants. This means that learning cultures can influence the behaviour of the apprentices and are, for example, shaped by learning professionals or managers. However, aspects of a learning culture can also be shaped by and reflect the goals of a company (Barabasch & Keller, 2020) and organisational learning is often influenced by changes in corporate cultures (Sørensen, 2001). Changing environmental demands on companies result in entrepreneurial patterns of action, which in turn shape the various learning cultures. The learning culture of a company is therefore never independent of its corporate culture. A suitable corporate culture is characterised by a pronounced employee orientation, which includes participation, meaningful work, good working conditions, regular competence development and a clear induction process (Denison, 1990). Taken together, this implies the importance of organisational trust for learning cultures to thrive, the dynamics of which we turn to in the following section.

2.2 Trust in the Organisational Context

The development of trust culture is a process (Misamer & Thies, 2017). Trust is fragile and can be quickly dismantled if the practices which support it's production are neglected (Möllering, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to how organisations cultivate expectations for trustworthy conduct, and the impact this has upon the cultivation of relationships in context.

The decision to trust is based upon an individual's expectations (Dunn, 1988) and is characterised by a so-called *reflexiveness*, informed by the trustor's values, knowledge and experience (Merton, 1996; Möllering, 2006). These factors strongly shape the extent to which the trustor experiences the trustee as trustworthy. A seminal contribution by Mayer et al. (1995) characterised the assessment of trustworthiness as related to three key characteristics: *competence, benevolence* and *integrity*. In other words, the trustor must believe that the trustee is able, willing and consistent in their approach to the trust relationship (Möllering, 2006), yet this is powerfully shaped by identity, experience and the context in which trusting takes place (Möllering, 2013).

Within the workplace, Lewicki et al. (2016) categorise trust as variously *calculus-based or identification-based*. Calculus-based trust describes how people explicitly, but also implicitly, weigh the costs and benefits of placing trust in others. In this way, an estimate is made regarding how much granting trust to another party will 'pay off'. Identification-based trust, on the other hand, is defined as a deeper, more personal kind of trust with a higher emotional investment between the parties. Employees develop the ability to anticipate the interests of the others and to follow each other through complex turns, because of trusting each other (Lewicki et al., 2016). Arguably, it is identification-based trust that is more successful in securing long-term cooperative relationships, of the kind that is beneficial to the development of an embedded culture of learning.

2.3 Relationships in the Context of the Workplace

Trust can be seen as the basis of any social interpersonal relationship (Misamer & Thies, 2017). In context of the workplace, there is trust in a manager, trust in other employees, and trust in the whole company (Schweer & Siebertz-Reckzeh, 2017). However, relationship management in the workplace is characterised by asymmetries which can present barriers to trust-building. Apprentices, for example, often feel as though they represent the lowest level in a company's hierarchy (Misamer & Thies, 2017). Groups with low power asymmetries show less conflict and better cooperation (Kabanoff, 1991, cited in Misamer & Thies, 2017). The role model behaviour of managers, the orientation towards principles of justice and the experience of opportunities for co-determination are decisive for the establishment of a culture of trust in the workplace (Misamer & Thies, 2017). In his book on the foundations of vocational education, Rauner (2017) distinguishes between *management by control* and *management by participation*, or more precisely between authoritative and participative

leadership. On the one hand, managers with a participative leadership style are trusted more by their employees. Participative leadership is characterised by flat hierarchies, a business process-oriented organisation of work and a high level of creative competence. Enabling people to actively participate in shaping their work is described as a guiding principle of VET. An increased opportunity for apprentices to show their own initiative increases learning motivation and success (Rauner, 2017).

Trust strengthens the relationship between employees and contributes to a satisfying and efficient cooperation, offering the potential to sustainably strengthen the innovation and competitiveness of a company (Becke et al., 2017). To be innovative, the cooperative culture of trust in a company must be well-developed. Research by Becke et al. (2011) illustrated that employees are more willing to contribute their expertise and work-related knowledge to innovation processes if they feel safe and surrounded by trust. Trust in employees' abilities is effective in motivating them to perform at their best (Cichy et al., 2011), and a demonstrable reduction in stress (Beard, 1982, cited in Misamer & Thies, 2017). Furthermore, the literature shows that institutions that rely more on trust and reduce control systems are more efficient and effective (Cichy et al., 2011). However, that is not to say that trust necessitates total autonomy. Indeed, Six and Sorge (2008) assert that trust must exist within a supportive 'relationship-orientated' approach to management. This means that structured autonomy is needed to meet the developmental and creative needs of apprentices (Weibel et al., 2015).

3 Methodology

This analysis is situated within a broader exploratory case study that was conducted at the largest telecommunications company in Switzerland. The aim was to develop and evaluate the impact of a novel VET model in which apprentices learn and work in a self-directed and project-based way (e.g., Barabasch et al., 2020; Barabasch & Keller, 2020; Barabasch & Keller, 2021). After successful pilot tests in the years 2003 and 2004, the new training model has since been adopted throughout the enterprise. The enterprise clearly differs from traditional training companies through its core training model which centralises the importance of *individualisation of training, coaching* and *project-based learning* (Barabasch et al., 2020).

The centrality of trust emerged as a prerequisite for innovative capacity, which we felt warranted further analytical attention. The case study approach which was adopted enabled an in-depth look at the development of the enterprise's apprenticeship provision in context, and as such the data allowed for a rich analysis of the various processes at work which support the adoption of trust-based learning cultures (Silverman, 2003). What follows is a deeper reading of this data, situated within the extant theoretical literature on structural and organisational trust, which allowed us to identify the core conditions required to develop and maintain trust relationships between apprentices and mentors in the organisational context.

3.1 Methods

Qualitative data were collected over a period of one year. The methods adopted included indepth semi-structured interviews with staff and apprentices which explored role descriptions, experiences within the apprenticeship, the relationship between learners and their coaches, how errors were dealt with, participation of apprentices in decision making, success stories as well as coordination between different institutions and stakeholders involved in apprenticeships. In addition, the research team visited 7 places of work and learning across the enterprise as part of a participatory observation.

3.2 Sample and Data Collection

A total of 24 interviews were conducted with management, training managers (hereafter referred as *QPA*), learning facilitators (hereafter referred as *coaches*) and apprentices (see Table 1). The interviews were conducted in both the German-speaking and the Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland. Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes.

Table 1: Overview Data Collection

Interviews:	
Apprentices	17
Training managers (QPA)	3
Management	4

The participants for the interviews and the sites were selected by the research team together with a VET manager of the company based on purposive sampling (Emmel, 2013). The sample represents a wide range of learners in different occupations and locations and allowed access to learners who had experienced varying levels of success (though more learners with positive experiences were in the sample). Apprentices were at different stages of their apprenticeship. All were between 15 and 19 years old and 26% were female.

Most of the apprentices were completing an apprenticeship in the field of Information Technology, which included learning roles such as *Digital Business Developer, Mediamatician, Interactive Media Designer, Information Technology Application Developer, Information Technology Platform Developer* or *ICT Specialist*. Other apprentices interviewed were completing an apprenticeship in Sales; learning the professions of Retail Trade Specialist or Commercial Clerk. The apprentices had completed compulsory schooling before their apprenticeship (primary and secondary school, a total of 9 school years) and performed well in the relevant school subjects.

The data collection followed the ethical guidelines provided by swissuniversities. Consent forms were signed by each participant after we had informed them about the study and the implications of their participation. Data were anonymized and stored according to the guidelines of the Swiss National Science Foundation and swissuniversities

The questions mainly concerned the organization and experience of vocational learning in the company; for example, they asked about positive and negative/challenging aspects of learning (or learning support) in the company, how learners are supported in their learning and how this learning support is experienced by the learners, the extent to which learners take responsibility (for work processes/workflows and products), how learners receive feedback, how mistakes are dealt with, what particular difficulties or successes the interviewees have experienced and how they perceive their own development over the course of their apprenticeship (or in their work as a learning mentor).

The qualitative data collected from the interviews and observations were processed through condensation, building categories and paraphrasing, by following Bohnsack's (2003) *formulative interpretation method* (see Table 2). This process was repeated several times during the analysis. The evaluating researchers met regularly to reflect on and revise the coding system of the topics that emerged. This allowed for ongoing feedback between data collection and evaluation phases and steadily increased the depth of the qualitative data analysis (Zaynel, 2018). This process of reflection and revision led to a "theoretical saturation", which is characterised by the fact that "no more new insights are gained and the data material is so deeply penetrated that the researcher can profitably survey and evaluate the data material" (Zaynel, 2018, p. 67). The data were analysed using the MAXQDA programme.

Table 2: Central Codes of the Data Analysis

Themes		*Discursive Elements*
General structural aspects	Conception of man	Direct speech
Challenges	Conditions for learning process	Otherness
Acting autonomously and taking initiative	Learning by doing	Me and others
	Conditions for creativity	Irritations
Flexibility / Agility	Conditions for performance	Imagery
Problem solving competence	Feedback	Cursing
Competition	Win-win situations	Choice of words related to "generate"
Past and present	Motivation	
Transformation	Passion	
Digitalization	Reflection	
The future	Work-life-balance	
Relationships	Recognition	
Trust	Coping with mistakes	
Conveyance		
Role models		

4 Findings

Findings from the data analysis demonstrated that the culture of trust in the company was reflected in the three areas of practice related to the vocational training framework it had adopted. The analysis presented here focuses three related themes associated with trust-building: relationship management, *error culture* (which is observed through supported risk-taking, and learning from mistakes) and personal initiative. The feedback culture is added here as part of a constructive error culture.

4.1 Relationship Management

The data demonstrated clear evidence that relations between employees was strong, cooperative and team-oriented, leading to strong working relationships, which extended to apprentices working at the enterprise. The experience of being trusted was supported by a mutuality, which was reflected in apprentices being treated as equals and listened to on par with employees. One learner reported "[...] we are not a company where the boss is on top, and the others are on the bottom. We are all on the same level" (20180611_1 Apprentice, Pos. 4). Communication at eye level, against a background of trust, in turn breeds trust. The practice of a 'flat' hierarchy in the company was also reflected in the cultural use of first-person address (or the '*you-culture*')[1] independent of whether the person was a CEO or a learner, which supported a non-hierarchical sense of belonging from the first day.

> *And of course, also through the 'you-culture' that we have within the company. From the cleaning lady to the top CEO, everyone calls you by your first name, instantly. That was something you had to get used to at the beginning. But it quickly helped you to feel that you had arrived. You quickly got into the whole thing in general. You had the introduction; you knew the stuff. And just because we all talk to each other immediately on a completely different level, you quickly arrive at the company. (20180611_1 Apprentice, Pos. 7)*

As illustrated above, the parity of esteem experienced by apprentices encouraged them to actively participate in a team consisting of experienced employees where they could benefit from their expertise. The conscious effort to promote participation on an equal footing generated a strong set of cultural values that allowed apprentices to generate what Lewicki et al. (2016) refer to as identification-based trust, which set the foundations for innovation to develop. Apprentices were gradually given increased responsibility according to their abilities and interests. The perceived self-efficacy of apprentices represents an important factor

1 In Switzerland, just as in Germany, France or Italy, there is a linguistic and cultural distinction between formal (often third person) and informal ('you') address depending on the social context and the person who is being addressed. In the context of this study, in a departure from the cultural norm, the company adopted an informal ('you-culture') approach which appeared to have the effect of flattening traditional hierarchical relations between staff at different levels of the organization.

for job satisfaction and job performance (Judge & Bono, 2001). Through cooperation and opportunities for cocreation on a basis of trust, high apprentice engagement was achieved.

Within the company, trust underpinned the relationships between the employees. Another apprentice reported:

> *Yes, the colleagues are actually always very open. They are also all very team-oriented. That's one of the recruitment criteria. What is also important is that they are all self-organized and reliable. You can always count on the fact that if you need something on a certain date... If you really need it, it's there. And that has always been very good. (20180323_3 Apprentice, Pos. 91)*

By creating a common culture of trust as a basis, cooperation could take place despite great diversity among the employees. The co-creation observed in this vocational training programme and the relationship building among the employees was a sign of the high culture of trust that had been established in apprenticeship training. Echoing Mayer et al.'s (1995) seminal work that trustee's must demonstrate confidence, benevolence and integrity, these findings highlight the importance of good will towards apprentices as foundational to the cultivation of trust relationships, allowing apprentices to feel a sense of belonging early into their placement.

4.2 Error Culture

The learning culture of the investigated company was characterised by an appreciative error culture, where taking risks and learning from mistakes was a welcome part of development within the enterprise. There was frequent mention of the practised error culture during the interviews, indicating that this was widely embraced throughout the whole company. Apprentices were allowed and encouraged to take risks, on the principle that constructive improvements can come from mistakes. The narrative of a coach expressed that:

> *So, making mistakes is encouraged. I have the feeling that a person probably doesn't learn that much by not making mistakes. Because only with mistakes can you gain knowledge and develop yourself further. Of course, it is important that there are mistakes and errors. So, a theft is not a mistake that can simply happen. It's a conscious decision and that's really a mistake. But someone who wants to do something well and then something happens, even if it's a serious mistake and maybe costs money or something, I don't think that's bad. When you see and the learner has also recognised, how did it come to this? What did I do wrong? How can I avoid it so that it doesn't happen again? And then it doesn't happen again, then it was a very good mistake and desirable. So, I am hoping for mistakes. (20180308_1 Coach, Pos. 8)*

Importantly, embedding risk-taking into a learning culture also requires making time and space for reflection. This was a prerequisite within the enterprise, cultivated by the feedback culture. Allowing for supported risk-taking contributed to a strong learning culture, which

recognised the importance of making mistakes for ongoing personal and professional development, allowing creativity to flourish.

Feedback also took the form of recognition and praise. The framework, in which feedback took place depended upon relationships between apprentices and their coaches. There was the possibility to give feedback by phone, by mail or by using other digital tools. Through regular feedback, small errors were addressed early on, corrected, and allowed serious errors to be avoided. The statement of a QPA shows that the apprentices were also closely accompanied:

> *Then, continuous feedback 'on the job'. At the very beginning there is also a target meeting, where it should be made clear what my expectations are and what his expectations are. This is to be agreed upon and written down once again, and towards the end, depending on how long it lasts, i.e. if the commitment lasts three months, there is another 'debriefing' towards the end, i.e. 'what did you do well', 'what did you not do well', 'where should you still develop'. This is very often about soft skills. And, if it goes for six months, you also meet once in the middle for a 'correction' and otherwise once again at the end and that's it. (20180308_2 QPA, Pos. 9)*

The feedback culture in the enterprise was not only one way, from the coaches to the apprentices, but also from the apprentices to the coaches or the QPAs. In the training report, apprentices have room for detailed feedback, but there was also an emphasis on giving and receiving feedback outside of the training report, in a timely and ongoing manner. Thus, apprentices were encouraged to always let their QPAs know if they have any suggestions or requests for changes, even while they are working on a project. Conversely, the QPAs or coaches also get in touch when they have feedback. This can be related to the way of working, but also of an administrative nature. It was also common for apprentices to give each other feedback on how they were working together. The narrative of a coach confirms this:

> *Yes, we always have postings on the intranet where apprentices can once again give their opinion or their feedback. They always do it, of course, in the education report. They give feedback on the training, and they give feedback to me, as their learning guide. (20180305_1 Coach, Pos. 76)*

Here, we see how the willingness of both parties to make themselves vulnerable in the exchange of feedback contributed to this cultivation of productive working relationships underpinned by trust. The central importance of vulnerability and risk-taking in learning has been documented by Biesta (2013), who posits that risk is central to the educational endeavour. This makes the capacity to be vulnerable within a learning culture imperative to educational success; something which is also central to the ability to place faith in others (Möllering, 2006; Schiemann et al., 2019).

If we consider trust within systems to be contingent upon implicit expectations for conduct (Luhmann, 1968, 2017), then the openness to feedback made *explicit* described in the excerpts above illustrates a constructive approach to the cultivation of trust. The mutuality

in the relationship between learner and coach further demonstrates a whole-organisational learning culture to which apprentices are a part, allowing all staff to grow together in the ongoing reproduction of trust (Möllering, 2013).

4.3 Personal Initiative

The corporate structures of the enterprise were highly complex and characterised by a whole network of formal and informal relationships. Too much freedom can be as overwhelming as too much control (Vallentin & Thygesen, 2017). This makes getting the balance between trust and control right important for the maintenance of trust in organisations (Högberg et al., 2018; Weibel et al., 2015). In terms of VET, this means that apprentices should be given enough freedom, but within certain framework conditions. The right balance of self-initiative and clear objectives is essential for the development of a cooperative culture of trust. Schiemann et al. (2019) further support this by stressing the importance of explicitly communicating benevolence in a coaching relationship, as this facilitates trust building and the capacity of the trainee to take initiative.

The learning culture at the investigated enterprise allowed for a lot of decision-making pos-sibilities and freedom. However, this freedom was not infinite but limited by clear goals. For example, there was the freedom to choose projects on the *Marketplace*, but there was also a list of competences that apprentices must learn to complete the training. Depending on the profession learned, these competences looked different. A coach explained what such guidance could look like:

> *And they control this themselves, but this also requires the control of the learning guide, who coaches them within the framework of the competence profile of their profession. Not that they suddenly do something that has nothing to do with their profession. Although sometimes that is also allowed, if the learner can justify it. If they want to discover something, because maybe they want to go in a specific profession later on. Then that can be. (20180308_1 Coach, Pos. 2)*

In addition to the individuals' choice of projects, the media and IT apprentices could often choose their own work location and work equipment. In hubs, which had been set up by the enterprise for cooperative work, apprentices could move freely and choose their own work-place. To guarantee this flexibility, the apprentices were provided with a subscription for public transport, which enabled them to work independent of location. In the end, the output needed to be correct, but the way to get there can be chosen independently and the work time can be allocated individually. With this offer, apprentices were free to decide whether and how they wanted to use it, but within conditions. The statement of an apprentice confirms this:

> *We have certain principles regarding working hours. In our team, you have to be there from nine to four. With exceptions, we can also leave a little earlier, if we have a private appointment or something. I don't make much use of the flexible working hours, because I always get up at the same time and I always want to go home at the same time. But the flexible work location, that's quite helpful. If your supervisor and the QPA trust you, it is also possible to work from home, even during the apprenticeship. That is rather an exception, but I have also had cases where I had to look after my dog at home and was grateful that I was able to work from home. (20180323_3 Apprentice, Pos. 69)*

The flexible working hours, as an expression of the enterprise's culture of trust, enabled apprentices to continue pursuing their hobbies during VET and to remain in regular contact with their social environment. Several apprentices chose their own daily rhythm and could be productive and creative during the time when they were cognitively able to do so. In this way, incompany VET was adapted to the respective needs of the apprentices through flexible options, which contributed to their successful completion. Autonomy and independent action thus led to more confidence, which in turn had a positive effect on the performance of apprentices. Studies from work motivation research show that the feeling of responsibility leads to long-term improvement in work management (Gawel, 1996).

The flexibility shown by the company's approach to the training of apprentices showed a careful negotiation of trust and control, and a conscious respect for the autonomy of apprentice learning trajectories. This supports Weibel et al.'s (2015) findings that well-considered control mechanisms can support the cultivation of trust. As Six and Sorge (2008) suggest, it is important to provide clear and consistent induction training and signalling regarding the boundaries for the granting and withdrawing of trust. Within the enterprise, this was demonstrated in the balance between trust and accountability represented in the training framework, which made the expectations for trust explicit whilst allowing freedom for apprentices to structure training around their individual learning needs and aspirations.

5 Conclusion

The analysis of our data shows the influence of an enterprise's learning culture on the cultivation of trust and its impact upon its in-company vocational education. It further deepens our understanding of the question which guided this analysis: The conditions needed to foster trust in apprentice/mentor relationships in the context of VET. We found that trust was characterised by three core features. Firstly, the relationship between apprentices, coaches and coworkers. Secondly, the importance of the enterprise's applied error and feedback culture, and thirdly, in the high level of initiative of the apprentices, which allowed them to help shape the training individually according to their needs.

The conscious attempts to flatten the structures of the organisation (for example, in the embedding of a '*you-culture*' (informal culture) throughout the enterprise, and the autonomy offered to apprentices over their learning journey, demonstrates the investment made in building a cooperative culture of trust. Six and Sorge (2008) emphasise the importance of a deliberate approach to trust-building within organisational policies to successfully establish trust. Within the in-company VET, this can be seen through the innovative framework condition for VET and thus supported the narratives within the data collected. There is empirical evidence that opportunities for co-creation lead to higher trust (Misamer & Thies, 2017).

It is also clear from various studies that being allowed to make mistakes and a certain support for risk-taking are conducive to learning processes (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Oser & Spychiger, 2005). Through a high degree of individual action competence (Handlungskompetenz), apprentices were able to cope with errors in a self-critical and constructive manner. Hence, trust can be seen as a more pronounced tolerance for mistakes. Errors are practically unavoidable, and they happen frequently, especially in training. Therefore, a company's strategy for coping with errors is central; focusing on how to constructively cope with errors, rather than who is liable for the consequences of a mistake (Harteis et al., 2006). A corporate culture in which errors are accepted and in which apprentices receive feedback on errors in order to avoid them in the future was viewed as a good learning atmosphere, reflecting the trust culture of a company. In learning situations, errors have an important meaning, and their analysis can make a learning process more effective (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Oser & Spychiger, 2005).

A learning culture that encourages initiative and co-creation and embraces errors and risk-taking, expresses a high degree of trust towards apprentices. However, far more factors than just the culture of trust is decisive for the success of VET. This case study has illustrated that trust can be postulated as an important foundational condition for successful VET and seems to be crucial for effective cooperation and relationship building in enterprises. Within educational networks, trust can be described as a lubricant (Wilbers, 2003), and as this case illustrates, the cultivation of identification-based trust (Lewicki et al., 2016) fosters relationships between apprentices and the enterprise which contributes to a learning culture which allows for open and constructive feedback loops. While it must be acknowledged that trust-building alone cannot be considered a panacea (Becke et al., 2017), this study has shown that starting with trust can support positive learning cultures, in which the risks associated with the learning process are embraced (Biesta, 2013).

Furthermore, it is important to note the specificity of the case study context. As discussed earlier, Switzerland enjoys relatively high institutional trust with high levels of social capital (Bundesamt für Statistik, BFS, 2011), potentially making the facilitation of the sort of learning culture described here much easier than in other country contexts. While there are important insights regarding how trust culture impacts upon apprentice learning, the

cultural specificity of the research context should be acknowledged. In addition, the research was conducted in an enterprise that has built for itself a strong reputation for innovative apprenticeship approaches. The findings are not representative for incompany training in general and a critical analysis of the role of trust within apprenticeships across enterprises would be more informative and allow for a stronger recontextualization within the country cultures. While the selective sample primarily provided us with examples for success, we acknowledge that the strong performance orientation and individualization of the training can also lead to forms of mistrust, which would require further investigation. Nevertheless, this case study showcases an important and unique example of a trust-based approach to VET. It is hoped that the insights from this case study may be valuable to other enterprises in supporting apprentices to develop the agility they need to enter an increasingly complex labour market. Our findings are relevant for shaping learning cultures within training more generally and provide an exemplary understanding of how trust can be built through various training design and delivery approaches.

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There are no competing interests on the part of the authors. The data collection adhered to the ethical guidelines provided by swissuniversities.

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