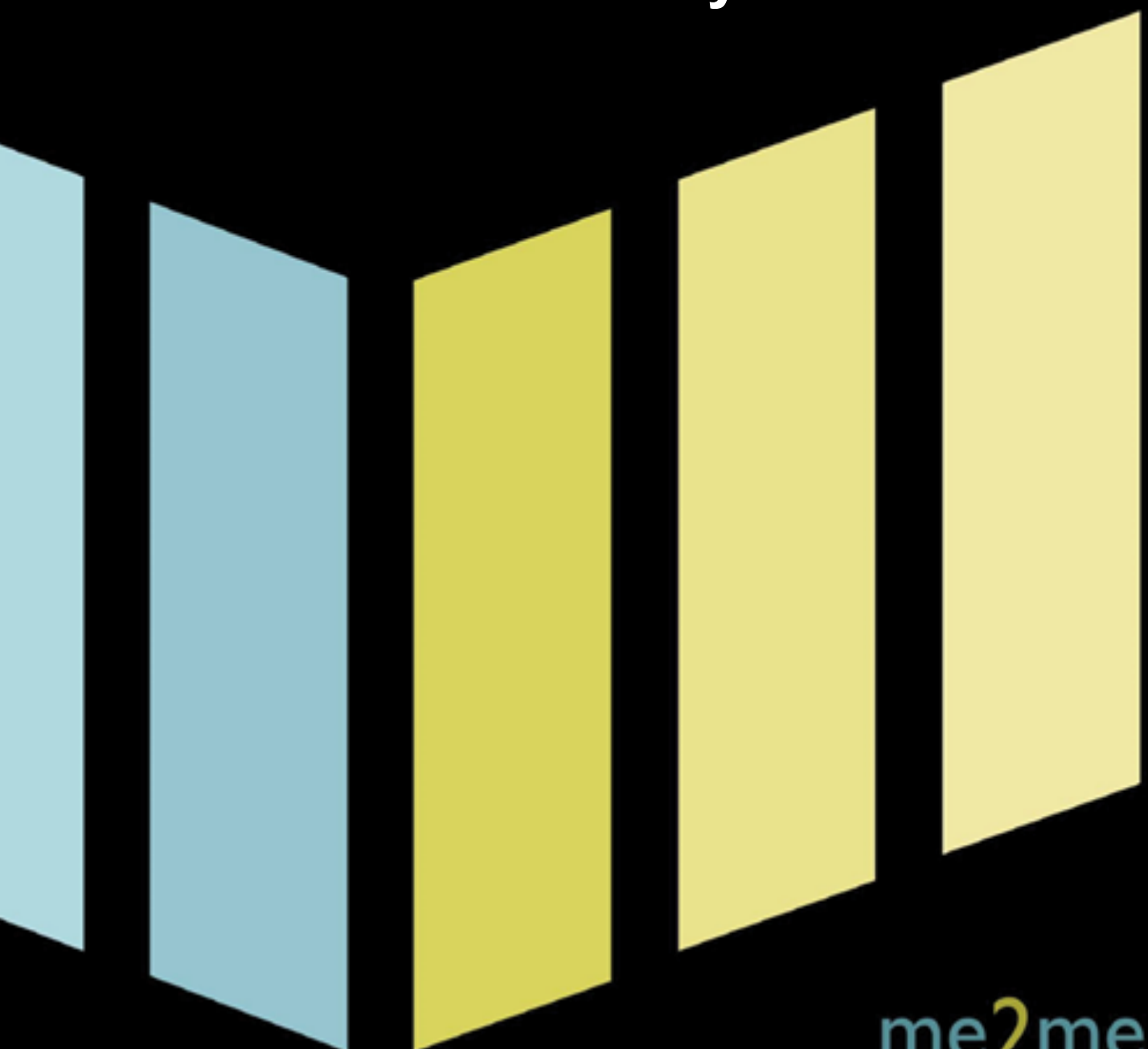


National Audit and Research Report Switzerland

Executive Summary



Continuing Education and Training in Swiss Micro-Enterprises

1. Introduction

Micro-enterprises account for 90% of the enterprises and 26% of the employees in Switzerland. However, little is known about the role played by continuing education and training (CET) in these companies, employing a maximum of 9 people, as official statistics exclude micro-enterprises.

Against this backdrop, the Swiss Federation for Adult Learning (SVEB) wants to provide an insight into the understanding and the importance of CET in micro-enterprises, the demand and possible subject areas as well as preferred methods of CET.

To cast light on the CET-practice in micro-enterprises, the present exploratory study uses qualitative guideline-based interviews with 14 Swiss micro-enterprises from diverse sectors as well as with four representatives of CET-providers with offers for micro-enterprises in their portfolio. The interviews were conducted in spring 2019.

The study was realized as part of the Erasmus+-project “Micro-enterprise Learning Partnerships” (ME2ME). The complete study is available online in German¹.

2. Practice of continuing education and training in micro-enterprises

14 representatives of micro-enterprises provided information about the role of CET in their company.

2.1 Understanding and importance of CET

CET is conceived in two major ways amongst the interviewed microentrepreneurs. Whereas one group considers CET in a traditional way, to say visiting courses, another group has a broader understanding of CET, including everything that extends knowledge, e.g. reading specialist literature.

Common to all of the interviewed microentrepreneurs is their positive attitude towards CET and the conviction that it is essential in order to stay up to date and survive as a micro-enterprise.

As to CET-strategies, no written documents exist in the 14 companies. However, planning CET-activities is not totally absent in the companies. It is in a rather implicit way, though, that CET is planned, for instance scheduling who is going to visit which conference.

The majority of the microentrepreneurs considers the amount and scope of their company's CET-activities as adequate. A number of microentrepreneurs lament that they would like to engage in CET more but simply do not have the time.

¹ <https://alice.ch/de/sveb/projekte/me2me/>

This brings us to the obstacles, which hinder the participation in and the promotion of CET in micro-enterprises on various levels. Most importantly, it is a combination of a lack of time and a lack of will to invest money, which limits microentrepreneurs' CET-activities. Thus, time- and cost-consuming CET-offers are little attractive to them. Second, CET-offers, which are unspecific and consequently do not meet their specific need, deter micro-enterprises significantly. Third, certain microentrepreneurs doubt the benefit of CET when the person in question reaches a certain age. Finally, the company's size plays an important role in the decision for the engagement in CET-activities. Especially individual companies struggle with renouncing work while taking time for CET.

2.2 Needs and subject areas of CET

Furthermore, the 14 microentrepreneurs were asked to assess in which subject areas they identified a need for CET. The highest need is located in specific professional competences, which are currently needed to accomplish a certain job. On the other hand, transversal competences, such as social, communication or accounting skills, are scarcely requested as they seem either not relevant enough or because they are outsourced.

2.3 Preferred formats of learning and instruction in CET

Concerning the formats of learning and instruction in CET, which micro-enterprises prefer, five categories are considered in the study.

The most common format is self-organized learning, such as video-tutorials or specialist books and journals. The main advantages lay in the possibility for flexible, bite-sized and needs-based learning and the low price. Attending a traditional CET-course is less common, though. Only for a very specific and pressing need, CET-courses are taken into consideration. Their duration and accessibility are crucial in the cost-benefit analysis.

Several micro-enterprise owners state that when they lack certain competences necessary to solve a particular issue they resort on external consulting and support services. Especially for financial and strategic management issues they rely on external consultants.

Internal knowledge transfer is not foreseen in companies of less than five employees, as there are hardly any intersections of thematic areas and responsibilities amongst the different employees. In companies with more employees, internal knowledge transfer takes place in an informal, often unplanned and unstructured way.

In peer-to-peer exchanges, especially specific technical discussions with colleagues inside and outside the company as well as networking in groups are appreciated by microentrepreneurs.

3. Approaches of the providers of continuing education and training

Even if data about CET in micro-enterprises is missing in Switzerland, there is a certain number of CET-providers, which count micro-enterprises to their clients. Four very diverse providers have been interviewed and are described

as effective-practice-examples in the study, as they have successfully positioned themselves in the market.

Case	Institution	Nb. staff	Thematic focus	Formats of learning and instruction
A	Institute at University	10	Inter-company, business management topics	Face-to-face
B	Local education provider	4 + 30 trainers		
C	E-Learning Service Provider	3	Subject-specific	E-learning
D	Language School	55	Languages	Face-to-face

Table 1: Sample of 4 interviewed CET-providers.

The comparison of the CET-providers shows that the thematic focus (either inter-company or subject-specific topics) determines the duration and format of an educational offer decisively. Online-learning-formats are only offered for subject-specific topics. It is being questioned that online-learning-formats are suitable for micro-enterprises, as there is a big trade-off between the specification of learning contents and the price.

Especially for the promotion of transversal competences and topics, such as business management, the interviewed experts clearly prefer face-to-face CET-offers. This course setting allows networking and informal exchange of experience between like-minded people as well as a healthy level of social pressure, which pushes people to make an extra effort they wouldn't do in self-organized learning-formats.

As success factors for CET-offers for micro-enterprises, the experts underline the benefit of a face-to-face course, as mentioned above. Also, it is described as crucial, that CET-offers generate a very high specific benefit. Micro-entrepreneurs want ready-to-use tools solving a specific problem. One way of defining this specific need is to assess the sector specific needs and develop corresponding CET-offers. Furthermore, it is also through the sector organizations that potential participants can be attained.

As obstacles to offering CET to micro-enterprises, the experts mention the above-mentioned trade-off between an individualized learning content and a restricted budget of the micro-enterprises to spend on CET.

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