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Dear colleagues,
What a year! 2014 is now closed, and the ESSC is proud of having achieved all of the ambitious objectives set at the onset of an intense twelve months of activities. Thanks to the (always excellent) cooperation among partners, the Council produced a consistent, structured and reliable final Report, gathering three thematic analysis of the sector and the recommendations to its stakeholders. Newsletter readers had the chance of glimpsing into the work in progress, and we are now glad to announce that the complete document is finally online. [see box on page 2]

And talking about online: you will find the report in our redesigned Web Portal, now completely revamped to better answer stakeholders' needs and expectations with easier access to all relevant information.

This year also saw concrete steps towards increased harmo-

nisation among European skills-related initiatives—as well as an Eastward expansion to Croatia, with other countries in line to join very soon.

These successes—and more—have been presented during our Final Conference in November. You can read all about it in this Issue, alongside a “mirror” interview with the Spanish employers’ organisation, following up the one we had with the workers’ organisation in November (if you missed it, go back to our Newsletters archive on the Net), and an insightful conversation on wholesale—an often overlooked, yet integral part of our sector—with a special focus on France.

Enjoy — we hope you had a great start in 2015!

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CrESSCendo to the grand finale: the 2014 Conference

Brussels, 21 November 2014. A sunny day which saw representatives from the European Commission (DG EMPL), the Social Partners of the Commerce sector, ESSC Commerce Partners and other key stakeholders from all over Europe gathered to look into the achievements of a year of intense work in the framework of the Skills Council, stemming from the analysis and sectorial knowledge of participating organisations.

In the context of the Royal Windsor Hotel, after the warm welcome by the Social Partners, associated national observatories—long-term members of the ESSC Commerce or more recent additions to the growing cohort of partners—took turns to present their organisations and to share with the expert public the benefits of their participation to this now well-established initiative. “We are increasingly realising

how valuable the work we do here is: it was not easy to gather and give a common, meaningful interpretation of all the sectorial data we put together, but we are very happy with the result—which pushes us to keep up the good work!” said one Partner. “We are looking forward to concretise our ideas for joint projects amongst us: we learned a lot about our respective initiatives by working together, and we start to see how combining our experiences can really extend the already rich range of activities we carry out in our respective countries”, added another.

Highlight of the day was the presentation of the much expected Report 2014, which addresses core sectorial topics: updated intelligence towards a better approach for Skills management in the Commerce Sector; the current sector’s employment situation, with indication of forecasts and

trends; the evolution of the sector's occupations and associated skills—including an informed and interesting analysis of emerging occupations, which will generate future job opportunities; and, finally, a collection of 'good practices': tools, strategies, initiatives and methods put in place at national level to monitor skills needs and actively address skills mismatches and gaps. *"These have been selected and analysed with a view to share a set of proven, successful instruments amongst the partners and beyond, with everyone out there"*—noted one of the experts supporting the group's activities—*"there are of course national differences to be taken into account, but we have seen a lot of interesting ideas circulating, and some of the statements made today hint at very practical steps that will be taken to make good use of this material"*.

In a *crescendo*, the day culminated in the presentation of the (now traditional) recommendations of the ESSC for Commerce to the sector's stakeholders, which pave the way for future activities and building up on the strong record already established.



"They span the whole range of our activities, reach out to related Commission initiatives in the field of skills, qualifications and training—which we are increasingly connected to: part of the work we have done this year— and address what we feel is the natural continuation and expansion of the work done so far"—enthused one of the Social Partners. *"We really feel they are essential for the successful prosecution of Council's action."*



The Report 2014 is currently available in English. It can be downloaded from the Report page of the ESSC Commerce Web Portal, following this link: www.europeancommerce.eu/en/reports.aspx

Printed versions are also available on simple request, and translations into other EU languages will be made available soon.



The Conference was, in fact, also an opportunity to learn how the European Commission views the work of the Skills Councils, and how they are positioned in the wider context of the different Commission's initiatives on Employment and Skills, which is expected to undergo a thorough review after the new Commission takes the reins.

"We really count on having the change of joining future activities of the Council", said one prospective new member (representatives of organisations currently negotiating their accession to the Council were also present to the event) *"we look forward to knowing as soon as possible the shape this initiative will take in the next few years."*

All in all, the Conference provided the per opportunity to showcase the work done so far: *"Dissemination is a key activity for the Council: the aim is to reach out to as many stakeholders as possible in the Commerce sector, to attain a critical mass to make a difference in addressing the skills gap and paving the way for the development of the skills and competences that are really needed on the ground"* explains one of the Social Partners. *"The new website, that we launch today, also goes in this direction: easier access to information, focus on core messages, maximum visibility for our activities, on all platforms—we feel we have done a good job"* was the reaction of one of the members.

Overall, the long Conference day was not just an opportunity to meet up and exchange views on vital topic, and not merely a way to close a whole year: but rather a way of opening up the door on the work that needs still do be done, and that awaits.

An interview with...

Manuel García-Izquierdo President *Confederación Española de Comercio*



In November, we raised a few questions to the Federación de Servicios de Comisiones Obreras (the Spanish Services Federation of CCOO, representing the sector's workers). Today, we ask the same questions to the President of the Spanish Commerce Confederation, representing the employers. The comparison makes interesting reading.

Q: Introduce us to your Organisation.

■ The [Spanish Confederation of Commerce \(CEC\)](#) represents almost 450,000 Spanish retail companies, most of them SMEs and self-employed retailers.

Q: How is your involvement in the ESC benefiting your Organisation and, more generally, your work in the Comisión Paritaria?

■ Being part of the ESC has given us the opportunity to deal with the problem of the skills gap in a holistic way, cooperating and exchanging best practices with other European organisations involved in this subject. Although we can help at domestic level to promote the qualification of the workers of the commerce sector, we need to adopt an European approach, so retailers can fully benefit from the Single Market.

Q: The European crisis: Who has been most affected - negatively or positively - in the Commerce sector in Spain?

■ The retail sector is one of the sectors creating most jobs and one of the main driving forces of the Spanish economy. The Spanish retail sector is composed by a network of MSMEs, which are essential to our economy due to their job and growth creation. On the other hand, the retail sector is especially affected by the economic and financial crisis we all are suffering.

These last years have been especially difficult for Spain, due to an economic and financial crisis that has resulted in a discouraging environment with unexpected results. This situation has had very negative effects, such as the proliferation of temporary jobs or the difficulties for the workers to keep their jobs. In this context, and taking into account that the retail sector has become a refuge for a high percentage of those who decide to establish new companies, it is clearly necessary for retailers to acquire new skills, capacities and abilities so they can compete in the existing markets.

Q: How are training and education contributing to address its consequences in your country?

■ Being a job based sector - taking into account that the employment rate of the Spanish retail sector has always been higher than in other sectors-, our sector is aware of the convenience of having well qualified workers. It is important for us to have workers that constantly improve their qualifications, in order to be able to compete in the existing environment and according to new distribution formats. These changes have to be preceded by orientation and ad-

vising activities aimed at the retail workers, as they are our companies' most valuable resources, especially in those companies whose workers are directly in contact with customers.

In ensuring the competitiveness of retail companies, it is essential to see training as a key aspect of the professional development of any worker. So, we have to promote and foster the development of new training plans focusing on the needs of the labour market. Improving the qualification of the workers in the retail sector has many advantages, because it will not only increase their value to retail companies, but will also assure that they can adapt to the changes that take place in our sector, triggered by the appearance of new technologies or new production processes.

Q: E-commerce and digitalisation: what is the outlook in Spain?

■ One of the main skill gaps in term of qualifications in Spain has its origin in the new occupations that are expected to emerge due to the development of the digital economy. According to the European Commission, 25% of the occupations that will exist in the EU in 2025 have not yet emerged.

This situation will be even more dramatic in the commerce sector, as the sales in the e-commerce have presented an anti-cyclical behaviour: although the sales in the Spanish commerce sector have fallen on the last years, the sales of the e-commerce have increased, reaching 14,000M € in 2013. In order to satisfy their customers, retailers need to know the reasons pushing the customers to buy on the Internet, what they expect to get, the internal requirements in order to coordinate the logistics processes... At present, we do not have in Spain a regulated qualifications system able to deal with these new emerging occupations.

Q: In your view, what are the most effective tools available to Spanish workers and companies to narrow the skills gap in the Commerce sector? What new tools are required?

■ In our opinion, in order to deal with the problem of the skills gap in our sector we need to promote the cooperation among all stakeholders involved (employers, trade unions, governments, VET institutions...). We have to be especially aware of the importance of involving educational institutions and commerce companies. The *Comisión Paritaria* has to be able to help improve the employability of the workers of the commerce sector by satisfying the companies' needs in terms of qualification and skills. Therefore, we should be able to anticipate the effects of the new technologies and the digital economy over the occupation of our sector.

En gros, a whole different *histoire*...

Wholesale is an integral part of Commerce: less visible to the general public, but—literally—a major mover in the European and global economy. “Raising awareness of the key role played by Business-to-business (B2B) trade is part of our mission” says **Bernd Gruner**, who represents at EU level both the French CGI (Confederation of Wholesale and International Trade) and the German BGA (Federation of Wholesale and Foreign Trade). “As organisations dedicated to wholesale and international trade we value cooperation, and invest on bilateral and European projects focussing on our specific priorities”, says Gruner. “Skills development is of course top on our list.”

One Europe-wide initiative led by CGI is the network enabling the mobility of apprentices and learners completing vocational training in international trade and transports & logistics: NETINVET. “Eight countries are involved, and a quality charter **NETINVET** adopted by schools, companies and tutors guarantees the value of the scheme for students—Gruner notes.—On the other hand, clear curricula of competences, gathering elements from every participating country ensures that the skills acquired are really expendable throughout the continent. And, in a sector where language capabilities and communication are core skills, such an experience provides an extra boost to future professionals.”

Two other national initiatives target future French workers in the sector: the employment and training portal [myBtoB](#) and the “meetings” (Rencontres) bringing together schools, teachers with companies on site visits and enabling exercises on real-life trade problematics. Learners can see ‘getting their hands dirty’ how organisational skills, knowledge of national, European and international regulations and mastery of IT tools for logistics and service provision can really



make the difference in this world. “These competences—Gruner stresses—will provide enormous value added, bringing growth and new jobs in EU wholesale in the years to come.”

If the crisis has hit wholesale trade (“but foreign trade is positive in France—a problem area is rather in the key domestic sector of construction”), which still suffers from a slow European recovery (“wholesale is the crystal ball in which one can foresee the state of the economy in the months to come, as what reaches the market goes through us first—and it does not look too good right now”, says Gruner), the interest is picking up for a sector that, in France, almost exclusively employs workers on open-ended contracts. “We are also witnessing increasing interest by female trainee and apprentices, who definitely bring changes in the culture of a sector traditionally male-dominated, and that we hope to see rise in key positions in the non-distant future.”

“Concrete career opportunities—Gruner concludes—are wide open for committed and enthusiastic individuals who are willing to learn the trade, bring in fresh skills and think outside the box to develop the innovative services that will feed the success of the businesses of tomorrow.” All in all, a whole different story.

Happy New Year!

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