

“Mechanical engineering may face a labour shortage of up to 20,000 people”

Frédéric Bonjour, Secretary for French speaking Switzerland at the industry organisation Swissmechanic, believes the private sector doesn't train a sufficient amount of apprentices. Interview.

BY JEAN-PHILIPPE BUCHS

The mechanical engineering industry, which employs around 40,000 people in Western Switzerland, is suffering from a lack of apprentices. What is the actual shortage in Western Switzerland?

Currently, we should be training between 500 and 600 additional apprentices a year in Western Switzerland (that is to say, twice as many as today) in order to make up the difference between the natural attrition and the staff coming into the industry. Given the declining demography, there is a serious risk that by 2020 we will be facing a shortfall of up to 20,000 people in the workforce needed to meet the needs in the sector.

Which are the main professions affected?

The mechanical engineering industry comprises between 8 and 10 professions. The most affected are polymechanics, production mechanics and automation engineering – in other words, the activities that involve manufacturing and processing procedures.

Are there fundamental differences between regions?

Western Switzerland is more affected because only 3% to 4% of the companies with fewer than 250 employees take on young apprentices to undergo sandwich courses (combining in-company training with learning in a school), whereas in the German-speaking part of Switzerland it's 10%. Although there are a significant number of apprentices graduating from the vocational schools in Western Switzerland, the companies there fail to train as many apprentices as the firms in German-speaking Switzerland, relative to the number of companies in our industry.

Are there also disparities according to the size of the companies?

You cannot generalise across the country. In the canton of Vaud alone, several large companies that used to train apprentices have closed down over the years. As for the few that remain, they only take on a couple



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Frédéric Bonjour, Secretary of the industry organisation in Western Switzerland.

of new recruits a year – except for Bobst, whose staff includes approximately 250 apprentices. On the other hand, small businesses are not exactly beating down the doors to hire staff.

Does this workforce shortage also affect trained and qualified personnel?

Yes, indeed. This phenomenon mainly affects polymechanics, since about half of the apprentices trained in that field quit their job four or five years after their graduation. Some of them decide to resume their studies. Others choose to switch careers.

How are the companies responding to this situation?

They are hiring cross-border commuters. In Western Switzerland, France has become the main provider of new employees. But this situation cannot last forever, because our neighbour will also be in need of human resources.

What will it take to encourage companies to attract the younger generation?

Professional associations should mobilise and support the firms in recruiting apprentices. Our association does it with some success in the canton of Vaud, where we promote a partnership between the Lausanne-based vocational school, the Ecole des Métiers, or private training centres and the companies so that they no longer have to take on all the training themselves.

If there are no staff to take over, what will be the consequences be?

The main risk is the relocation of production abroad. But we will definitely fight to delay this outcome as best we can. Professional associations will have to invest more and more in advertising campaigns to promote the industry and their professions. Furthermore, I am pressing for a common policy across all the main associations in the engineering industry. Today, we are competing with each other instead of combining our efforts. ■