

## **Promoting Basic Skills at the workplace**

Experiences from Switzerland with the GO Model

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*The closer the learning is to everyday life, the easier it is for adults to learn. This is especially true for less qualified people. They learn best in situations that affect them personally, when it comes to improving their own life and work situation.*

SVEB 2015, P. 4

The 2005 National Report on the Adult Literacy & Lifeskills Survey (ALL Study) for Switzerland counted 800,000 adults who had difficulty reading related texts, 400,000 adults who could not solve simple arithmetical problems. 64% of this group were employed at the time of the study (see Federal Statistical Office 2006). However, only a small proportion of those who could benefit from basic skills courses have found and still find their way to a corresponding course. Can learning at the workplace open up promising access to this target group?

But what does it take for companies to invest in improving the basic skills of their employees? And how can adults with basic skills needs benefit from workplace-related training? How do the participants in these training courses succeed in generating impulses that have an impact beyond the workplace?

These and many other questions were asked by a group of experts as part of the first GO project launched in 2009 on the initiative of the SVEB (Swiss Association for Continuing Education). Together they developed the GO model, which is based on promoting competences through concrete situations in the workplace. GO thus aims to enable companies and employees to benefit from the courses in a concrete and tangible way. It is always a question of concrete action in the workplace and thus in learning to improve the skills needed to cope better with everyday situations. Between 2009 and 2018, three consecutive GO projects were implemented with the financial support of the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SBFI). The projects were supported by the SVEB and the Intercantonal Conference for Continuing Education (IKW), in which all 26 cantons are represented. In the GO and GO2 sub-project, GO Kantone, they exchanged ideas and networked on the subject of promoting basic skills. In the three projects, the GO model was tested in 20 companies of different sizes, from Swiss Federal Railways to a Kebab stand. The companies were acquired by training providers, and the SVEB supported them in the implementation with training modules and advice.

### **Framework conditions for workplace-oriented promotion of basic skills**

Since the Swiss Continuing Education Act came into force on 1 January 2017, the cantons have been responsible for "acquiring and maintaining basic adult skills". They can promote workplace basic skills through federal and cantonal funds.

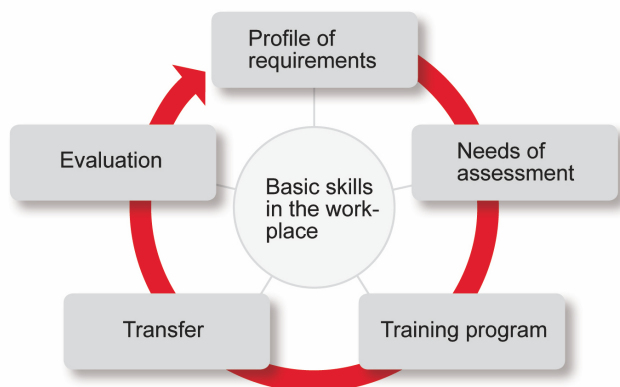
In 2018, the Swiss Federal Council decided that the promotion of workplace based basic skills should be established as a priority at national level from 1 January 2018. The lack of skilled workers, an increasing number of older employees at risk of losing their jobs, the expected effects of digitisation and the adoption of the mass immigration initiative had laid the political foundation for this initiative by the Swiss Federal Council. The GO model is the conceptual basis of the funding priority. It has thus moved from the development project to the national funding structures. Originally, the funding priority "Basic competencies in the workplace" was limited to three years, but it has now been decided to continue it at national level up to and including 2024.

The SBFI subsidises workplace-oriented training courses of 20 to 40 hours with a lump sum of CHF 3,000 for the development of the measure and CHF 15 per participant unit. The prerequisites are that participation counts as working time, that basic skills are trained in situ and that the transfer of

what has been learnt to the workplace is ensured. Applicants are companies; subsidies are granted for consultancy and training services in the company. The difference to the full costs of the providers is paid by the company.

Since the funding priority came into force, approximately 2,500 employees have been reached through workplace-oriented training. So far, more than 50 companies have submitted applications. The number of participants per company ranges from 6 to 400. The increasing need for training in the course of digitisation and automation is particularly noticeable in the companies' needs, often in connection with changed processes and increasing communication requirements. The latter combine increasing demands due to technology with increasing demands on the language, reading and writing skills of employees.

### The five steps of the GO model



#### Step 1: Requirements analysis

The job-oriented promotion of basic competences starts with an analysis of the requirements of the workplaces. Do work and safety instructions have to be understood or read, are there linguistic challenges in customer contact, do news or reports have to be written, tables have to be filled in? Are digital terminals and software used? Conversations and observations lead to an initial requirement profile that depicts current and future activities in the form of concrete action situations.

#### Step 2: Needs assessment

The objective of the needs assessment is to determine whether and, if so, in what situations the employees who are scheduled to participate in the training meet the requirements or not. Simple assessments, developed on the basis of the requirements profile, help to make the learning needs of individual participants visible in relation to the requirements of the workplaces. This involves getting to know the participants and finding out what personal learning needs and requirements they have.

#### Step 3: Training measure

The requirement profile and needs assessment form the basis for the training measure, which takes place in the company if possible, at a time that is favourable for the course of the company and for the participants. Learning at the workplace is successful if there is a close connection to everyday professional and/or private situations and thus also the possibility of applying what has been learned and experiencing the improvements achieved directly. Ideally, the needs of the company and the individual needs of the participants come together in the design of the training measure. The training contents must be relevant for the participants and the goals must be attainable. It is in the interest of the company that employees cancel their employment by e-mail, e.g. in the event of illness. If at the same time the participants practice how to drop out of school in case of illness, then the attractiveness and relevance of the learning content for the participants will increase.

#### Step 4: Transfer

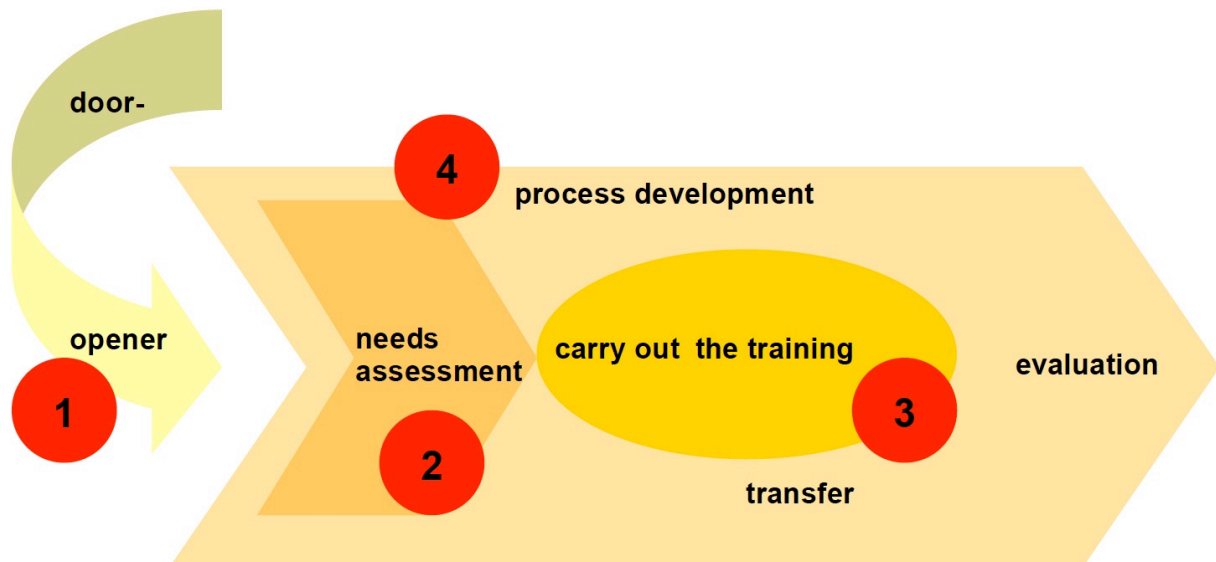
Newly acquired skills must be consolidated through application, otherwise they will not have any effect. This must be consciously taken care of. Therefore the transfer in the GO model enjoys special attention. It is the decisive success factor that must be thought through, organized and supported by the company from the very beginning of the GO process. The more involved the company is in the transfer process, the greater the noticeable benefit will be for all participants. If concrete situations are chosen as a starting point for learning, the basis for the transfer has already been laid. If, for example, employees practice carrying out calculations in Excel independently within the framework of quality assurance, they should be given the opportunity by their superiors to be able to apply the newly acquired skill in everyday work. If the superiors are informed about the transfer tasks of their employees and give them time to implement them in their daily work, then this transfer step means a short-term delay or "disruption" in the course of operations, but the benefit for the company depends essentially on whether what has been learned can "arrive" at the workplace in the form of changed behaviour or not. Changed daily practice leads to further competence increases beyond the participation in a training course.

#### Step 5: Evaluation

An ongoing evaluation of the training takes place on the one hand as a course evaluation together with the participants and on the other hand as a process evaluation together with the operational actors. Reflecting on the experiences of the actors involved can lead to further improvements, e.g. by finding that notices posted by management are not understood or that the language used for safety regulations is too complex. The evaluation together with the company could lead to written messages being written in a more understandable way. It is essential that the effort required for the evaluation is proportionate to the course implemented.

### The GO Process: Functions and Interfaces

The functions outlined in the GO process model clarify responsibilities and interfaces that must be actively managed.



The door opener smoothes the way into the company and hands over the responsibility for the further process to the process supervisor. He/she is responsible for the entire process and all interfaces to the actors involved and, together with the company, decides on the objectives of the training measure, the scope of the requirements and needs analysis, the framework conditions for the training and the anchoring of the transfer of what has been learned in the workplace.

The course leader also play an important role. Working with the GO model requires experienced course leaders who are able to move in the operational environment and have a high affinity to the target group. It is essential that they can engage in situ teaching without a final concept for a course. In this context, situating teaching means embedding the learning process in the action situations at the workplace: such a procedure requires a high degree of flexibility, experience and the ability to flexible planning from the course leaders.

If the learning is so closely oriented to the needs of the participants, then they themselves bring new situations into the course events again and again, which are taken up by the course leader and translated into a learning cause. This procedure, individualised, situated and context-based, has a very motivating effect - according to the feedback from participants from 20 GO pilots. The participants do not feel "schooled" but taken seriously as learning subjects.

Ultimately, every company is different, so every implementation of the GO model is different. The individual steps in the GO model and the process must be flexibly designed by the actors involved (the door openers, the process facilitators, the course leaders) and adapted to the respective company context. The GO Toolkit provides support here. These are 2 volumes, written by experts within the framework of the GO projects. Volume 1 contains guidelines that explain the work with the GO model in detail. Volume 2 contains descriptors which help to record and describe the basic competences required for an activity and to develop and design training measures. The GO Toolkits can be downloaded free of charge from the SVEB website.

In the following, practical examples will provide insights into the needs that arise and how GO is implemented in companies.

### **Learning needs of low-skilled employees as a mirror of digital requirements**

As our experience has shown, the willingness of companies to train semi-skilled and unskilled employees increases when difficulties arise in the companies. These can be operational processes, productivity, quality or occupational safety. Often it is a specific pressure of suffering in the company that leads to the learning needs of an otherwise neglected group of employees becoming an issue. Ten years ago, poor language skills were the most visible "deficit" of employees. More recently, automation and digitisation processes in companies have also been affecting so-called "simple workplaces". This development is leading to increased demand for workplace-oriented training in this area (see Schmid/Hischier 2018).

One company found that the planned introduction of an e-mail account for all employees, including those in production, could only be implemented with targeted training. The needs analysis revealed that some employees needed support not only in using the program but also in reading and writing messages.

In 2010, a company in the food industry was preparing the automation of final packaging. Twelve employees were prepared to use the new equipment so that they could grow into the new requirements and were not afraid of the digital end devices used to control the packaging. Not only were they able to work with the new machines in the workplace, but they were also supported in using the computer privately with the aim of reducing fear of contact. Private use of the Internet was intended to facilitate their transition to computer-controlled screens at the workplace. In the meantime, a few years later, automation in the company is well advanced. The goal of bringing the traditional workforce into this process was achieved.

One company in the metalworking industry found that employees were working with outdated work instructions because they had difficulty extracting the latest documents from the electronic system.

The aim of the training was to improve the system's handling as well as language skills. This avoided mistakes and relieved the superiors.

Logistics and the commercial vehicle industry are also strongly affected by digitization processes: On their daily tours, employees must use mobile devices to communicate competently with their own company and customers, both verbally and in writing, and to process, store and send documents. This illustrates the extent to which the demands placed on basic skills are currently increasing at many workplaces.

Even if digital requirements are becoming more and more prominent, it is usually combinations of several basic skills such as understanding and speaking, reading, writing and arithmetic that are necessary to cope with the respective situation and must therefore be dealt with in a training course.

### **"Benefits" of the GO training courses from the point of view of the companies manifold**

The external evaluation by Martin Schmid and David Hischier from 2018 showed the following: Company representatives whose employees had taken part in GO training found that their employees had become more confident in what they did on a daily basis, that they were willing and able to take on more complex tasks, that they had become more flexible and had the confidence to take on more responsibility. This relieved the pressure on their superiors. It was also noted that the number of errors was decreasing and workflows were improving. All these factors had a positive effect on the productivity of the company from the point of view of the company representatives surveyed.

Many training courses in the area of basic competences at the workplace were aimed at improving communication in the broader sense. This had positive effects on social skills, teamwork and dealing with customers (see Schmid/Hischier 2018). As further evaluation results, Schmid and Hischier could state that the individualised GO training courses close to the workplace had a very positive effect on the motivation and self-confidence of the employees: According to their own statements, the participants felt valued for their individual support - their loyalty to the company increased noticeably. From the point of view of the company representatives, it was also easier to recognise the potential of the employees and the willingness of those wishing to continue their training. This would also pave the way for participation in internal training and further training measures. Individuals would also have the opportunity to enter vocational training or obtain an industry certificate. Workplace-oriented promotion of basic skills, as Schmid and Hischier summarise, can therefore contribute as part of company personnel development to fully exploiting the existing potential in the company, which plays an increasingly important role in times of a shortage of skilled workers.

The cost-benefit calculation is also positive overall in the companies: Despite the financial and personnel expenditure, the benefit for the companies is undisputed from their own point of view, as they are working on precisely those topics that lead to distortions in the course of operations. The "product GO" is challenging to sell, the successes to date show that it is best suited for companies with an affinity for continuing training that want to retain and develop their employees (see Schmid/Hischier 2018).

### **Learning not "only" for the workplace, but how should it continue?**

Collected feedback from participants from the evaluation forms of the GO courses and evaluation interviews with course instructors and company representatives showed that the vast majority of participants experienced the GO training courses as motivating because their personal learning needs were at the centre. This was all the more true when the company made transfer time possible and the superiors were interested in the educational process and were committed to learning

progress. The appreciation experienced in this way had a positive effect on the loyalty to the company. The overwhelming majority of the participants said they wanted to continue learning after the workplace-oriented training. Individual participants aimed for further training after the training, non-formally or formally.

An important task of the training providers would therefore be to work together with the company and the participants to find out which further learning and training opportunities would be possible and meaningful for the individual. This may be the start of a longer-term range of courses in the field of basic competences, a language course and/or vocational qualification. This requires an expanded range of courses in the area of basic skills, which offers both thematic and regional opportunities for follow-up. This willingness to continue learning has not yet been systematically taken up in Switzerland and there is no nationwide offer of courses in the area of basic competences. Within the framework of the Austrian Adult Education Initiative, there is already a nationwide range of courses that would meet precisely this requirement. If there are no opportunities for further learning outside the company setting, the effect of these short measures on participants will be limited.

### **Summary and outlook**

Workplace-oriented learning models have been developed and tested in many countries over the past decade. The approaches are broadly comparable. In Europe, Norway, with its well-developed Skills Plus funding structure, is a pioneer; internationally, the New Zealand Skills Highway is regarded as a role model. There are a number of successful projects in Germany, such as Alpha-Grund, GRUWE and BasisKomPlus, funding structures based on sustainability are called for.

With more than 50 companies and 2,500 participants, a respectable start has been made in Switzerland's national funding priority. The needs of the companies are obvious and largely undisputed.

So far, it has not been possible to sufficiently publicise the new offer among companies. More efforts are needed to reach and inform companies, not least to support the acquisition of continuing training providers. Only when more training providers develop the implementation of job-oriented courses in companies as a new business field will the number of participants increase rapidly. The prerequisite for this acquisition is a broad company network that many providers do not have. Only a long-term funding structure provides sufficient planning security to invest in the acquisition of companies and the expansion of the company network.

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### **Further Links**

GO Toolkits (SVEB) – Leitfäden und Deskriptoren: <https://alice.ch/de/dienstleistungen/go-upskilling-am-arbeitsplatz/go-modell/>

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