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How Austria looks to train talent for the future

Large companies team up with universities to nurture digital skills in the next generation

Students at the University of Vienna. Education can act as a crucial pipeline to tech careers © Diego Cupolo/Nur Photo via Getty Images

Valerie Hopkins 15 HOURS AGO

Ali Mahlodji is trying to prepare the next generation of Austrians for jobs that do not yet exist. The company he founded eight years ago, Whatchado, helps match jobseekers with companies and informs first-time would-be employees about careers they may not have learnt about in school.

Mr Mahlodji, a former teacher who came to Austria as a refugee from Iran 35 years ago, grounded the company in his experiences as a young man. Before dedicating himself to start-ups, he had held more than 40 jobs, from cleaning floors, project managing at a corporate technology company, to teaching at a high school.

"Sixty-five per cent of children entering primary school today will end up working in completely new job types that don't yet exist," says Mr Mahlodji, citing a 2017 study by the World Economic Forum.

That is why, more recently, he founded a new company, FutureOne, as an interface between large companies, students and teachers, as educators and businesses plan for a more digitally oriented future.

> **During the corona crisis in Austria, we saw that the labour market and the education system were not brought up to speed to help people adapt to changes**
>
> Ali Mahlodji, FutureOne founder

While the nature of work is changing all over the world, Austria, he says, has been particularly slow to adapt.

"Austria's education system is still the same as 100 years ago, teaching students things that won't necessarily give them the tools they need in their hands for their later careers," he argues.

While Austria's real GDP per capita last year was the seventh-highest in the EU, the country "is adapting to the global digitalisation frontier at a slower pace than in comparable countries", the OECD reported last year. The club of mostly rich nations also found that the availability of digital skills in Austria's population trailed that of its western European peers.

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Digitalisation was identified as a primary goal of the government in 2019, but one that has been interrupted by the pandemic, which has presented the country with its highest level of unemployment since the winter of 1952-53, according to the Austrian Institute of Economic Research (WIFO).

That is due, in part, to a mismatch of jobs and technology skills. Austria trails comparable European countries, including Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK, in the "diffusion of ICT and the use of digital technologies", especially in the business world, according to a WIFO study.

Large companies are teaming up with universities to improve digital skills among the next generation of workers.

Mondi, the world's largest kraft paper and paper bag producer, has about 10 per cent of its employees in Austria. It has partnerships with the Vienna University of Economics and Business and the Graz University of Technology to train young talent in business and science.

The company has also focused on bringing innovation consultants to its factories and plants in Austria, says the group's HR director Michael Hakes.

While more people, including women and older workers have joined the labour market in recent years, many jobs have been filled by migrants or workers commuting across borders, according to the OECD.

In 2019, the Paris-based organisation found that the proportion of migrants among the total number of people employed in Austria had continued to rise since the early part of the past decade. The OECD also projected that immigration could help offset the effects of an ageing population.

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However, Austria's centre-right chancellor has taken a hard stance on immigration, clamping down on programmes assisting recent migrants with language and assimilation.

Since January, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz's Austrian People's party has governed with the Greens — a coalition that includes the country's first minister from a migrant background, justice minister Alma Zadic.

But the coalition agreement includes stricter anti-migration controls. In an interview earlier this year, Mr Kurz said: "If we do not control who is allowed to come we will not be able to live in security . . . and we will not be able to keep our identity."

Mr Hakes says Mondi, which uses Austria as a regional hub for its central and eastern European operations, was "reliant" and "appreciative" of migrant labour.

"We are looking for diversity, not only about gender but also nationality . . . If you have grown up in a different culture that is always good, that creates new ideas, new ways of working," he says.

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As the economy rebounds, Mr Mahlodji believes teaching technical skills and versatility are more important than ever.

"During the corona crisis in Austria, we saw that the labour market and the education system were not brought up to speed to help people adapt to changes . . . and how to recreate themselves in uncertain times."

Mr Hakes says the coronavirus crisis will drastically reshape the labour market, and while it will present some difficulties, there are also opportunities.

"It took a pandemic to finally make the workplace about people," he says. "During this pandemic we have seen that dramatic change is not only possible but that it can happen within weeks or days."

He adds: "Bigger changes are possible in the future if we find the right way of explaining it and taking our people with us."

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