

Interview with Eurochambres Skills Committee Chair, Martha Schultz

1. What is the main priority of the Skills Committee for the remainder of 2022?

The committee's overall priority is to address Europe's skills shortages. Our businesses continue to struggle to fill open positions with qualified candidates, and the situation is not improving. According to our Eurochambres Economic Survey 2021, while unemployment rose at the end of 2020, skill gaps widened as well. That may appear to be a paradox, but it demonstrates dramatic structural changes in the labour market. Sudden digitalization, pandemic-related lockdowns, and teleworking are just a few of the trends that have turned the labour market on its head. Now, the green transition and the war in Ukraine are creating further shifts in the skills demand.

Eurochambres in particular campaigns for a stronger focus on vocational education and training, notably through combining apprenticeship schemes with academic learning at secondary and tertiary level. Many graduates will require additional training in order to find a suitable job. This is why the Skills Committee is also pressing for increased mobility of vocational education and training (VET) students and improve skill intelligence tools that will help adapt education programmes to the rapidly evolving patterns in work.

2. What events do you have lined up in this area?

We have a number of events planned this spring to address the labour market situation and how to draw conclusions from recent changes. Eurochambres will host a session on the mobility of VET students on 18 May as part of European Vocational Skills Week 2022. This event will bring together some of the most successful chamber projects aimed at making VET mobility an upskilling experience. We will also present some policy recommendations to improve mobility in VET, which will follow a discussion on a VET mobility report prepared by our Austrian Chamber colleagues (WKÖ).

On 30 May, chambers with experience in supporting refugee integration will present their projects aimed at helping refugees to find jobs, even if only temporarily, during another Eurochambres event.

Then on 2 June, we will host an event to discuss chamber and business practises and perspectives on the green transition in the labour market. This is a significant change for millions of businesses with considerable implications in terms of skills, and we will hear about successful examples of companies from industries that will undergo the most reforms, such as automotive or hospitality.

Chambers across Europe are working hard to prepare businesses across many sectors and of all sizes to optimise the implications of the green transition. This also allows us to advise EU and national policy-makers about the support that SMEs require in order to comply with the requirements and changes that public authorities are putting in place.

3. The pandemic and now the war in Ukraine have had a huge impact on the business community. How do you perceive this in relation to the labour market?

Teleworking enabled more flexible solutions that created new opportunities and allowed for better management of family obligations. Employers and employees are adjusting to this new normal that is set to stay after the lockdowns.

Now, the war in Ukraine has forced nearly 6 million Ukrainians to flee. This of course also has a socio-economic knock-on effect more broadly across Europe. The refugees require assistance, and they also expect to find work. Many of them used to be entrepreneurs and may seek help re-establish their businesses in Europe. Chambers and the business community will assist them in this endeavour, but it also necessitates appropriate support of public authorities.

Chambers are happy to help refugees integrate into the workforce, and we have a lot of experience doing so! Following the influx of migrants in 2015, many chambers launched projects that assisted thousands of refugees in finding jobs or training opportunities. WKÖ has had a successful mentoring programme for migrants in Austria since 2008, in which refugees with access to the labour market can also participate. We would like to share our experiences with our chamber network from the countries currently experiencing the most significant migration from Ukraine.

Overall, there is much to be done to improve the labour market, and turbulent times can be the best context to make changes. The overriding goal is to ensure smooth cooperation between businesses and educational institutions, which will result in the development of education programmes tailored to the needs of European businesses.

All current challenges, such as the integration of refugees or the ecological transition, can be overcome with appropriate support. Eurochambres will play an important role here as an intermediary with the European institutions. Best practices show the authorities that chambers have valuable experience. We help develop solutions that prepare our students and workforce for the changing labour market.



Marta Schultz – Eurochambres Vice President and chair of Skills Committee. Vice President of Vice-President of the Austrian Federal Economic Chamber