

Training & Employment

Apprenticeship contracts: why they are breached?

In order to reduce the numbers of apprenticeship training contracts which fail to be completed, the reasons for these failures have to be determined. The results of this study show that in some cases, the outcome was not actually negative and that some other cases would no doubt have been difficult to prevent.

Preventing pupils from dropping out of the educational system at all levels, from primary school to University, is one of the public authorities' major concerns. Although training via apprenticeship favours pupils' transition to work, the risk of young apprentices' failing to complete their training contracts is far from negligible. This situation is difficult to explain, however, since no attempts have been made so far to monitor broken apprenticeship training contracts regularly on the national scale. The data available in this connection are therefore rather scarce and partial. Céreq's "Generation 2004" survey is one of the few nation-wide surveys providing information about broken apprenticeship contracts and the reasons why they occur. The drop-out rate among French apprentices was estimated at about 17% (see the inset on page 2). Another survey was conducted in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region with a view to explaining why apprenticeship contracts were not completed: the authors have put some suggestions to the public authorities as to how the drop-out rates might be reduced.

The limits of an administrative indicator

In the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region, 28% of apprenticeship contracts fail to be completed: 10% of apprentices give up during the trial period and 18% at a later stage. These figures are based on the numbers of contract annulment forms received by the organizations responsible for managing these contracts (see below: "Breach of contract: the legal aspects"). There is actually nothing particularly alarming about these figures, since similar rates have been recorded with contracts of other kinds. In any case, the question as to whether employers and employees are well matched can only be settled after the latter have spent some time at the firm.

These statistics may reflect an administrative reality, but they do not seem to provide a relevant means of assessing apprenticeship. High drop-out rates might, for example, be due to failure to guide apprentices appropriately and to advise them and follow them up at their firms and apprenticeship centres (CFAs). However, high rates of annulment tend to persist despite the efforts made by masters and trainers to mobilize pupils who have lost their motivation.

The outcome of a broken contract is not always negative, however, and it does not necessarily mean giving up apprenticeship altogether. Thanks to the efforts made by the CFAs to help these apprentices find new firms, new contracts are often subsequently signed. Some trainees terminate their contracts after obtaining their diploma. Since these cases are counted along with the others, they contribute to building a falsely negative picture. On the other hand, untoward events are overlooked by the indicators used, as when the firms do not honour the promises they have made when signing the apprenticeship contract. ...

Breach of apprenticeship contracts: the legal aspects

During the first two months of apprenticeship training, which correspond to the trial period, the contract can be annulled by either the employer or the apprentice. After the trial period, the terms of the contract must be met up to the date of expiry, with the exception of the following cases:

- it can be annulled by the apprentice once the latter has obtained the qualifications targeted;
- it can be jointly and expressly annulled by both parties;
- it can be annulled by an industrial tribunal if either of the parties to the contract has committed a serious offence or consistently failed to meet their obligations;
- or if the apprentice turns out to be unsuited to the occupation in question.

Unilateral application for annulment of the contract by either party during the first two months or by mutual agreement should be submitted in writing to the Director of the Apprenticeship Training Centre or the head of the establishment, as well as to the body with which the contract was registered, which should immediately inform the Departmental Delegation for labour, employment and vocational training (DDTEFP) or the equivalent department at the place where the apprenticeship contract was being carried out.

(Source of information: practical files on the French Ministry of Labour's website)

••• Lastly, external factors can be responsible for broken contracts: apprentices may give up their training because of changes in national and regional policies, the state of the labour market, demographic trends and competition with other training paths. When an economic upturn occurs, for example, young people are often tempted to give up apprenticeship in order to take full-time jobs. The CFAs make every effort to persuade them to complete their training in order to obtain a diploma giving them access to more permanent and better-paid jobs. In addition, some competition may occur between alternating work/school training and school-based training. In the field of hairdressing and beauty care, for instance, some apprentices have been diverted to private vocational training schools.

The rates of annulment should therefore be interpreted with care. As the following findings show, it is necessary to determine the underlying reasons to be able to define appropriate measures for decreasing the numbers of broken training contracts.

The main reason for broken contracts: unsatisfactory occupational environments

About one out of every two apprentices questioned declared that they initiated the breach themselves. 14% of the respondents said it was their employers who took the initiative, and 15% failed to complete their contracts because they had already obtained their diplomas (see the graph on the next page).

The apprentice, the employer or the CFA? Two-thirds of the contracts were broken by one of these three parties. 40% blamed the unsatisfactory occupational environment: more specifically, they claimed that they were learning nothing from the work they were asked to do (7%), that the work bore no relation to the training they had undergone (6%), that the pressures to increase their productivity were too strong (5%), and that they felt they were not being treated respectfully (8%). Long or unsuitable working hours (4%) and low wages (5%) were also cited, especially by the youths at level V. Those at level IV and above less frequently (32%) blamed their broken contracts on unsatisfactory occupational environments.

Some apprentices find the tasks they are given and/or the occupational environments they encounter barely tolerable. But the practices of employers who do not take the real aims of apprenticeship contracts into account are certainly also liable to generate dissatisfaction: 13% of the host firms declared that they took on apprentices to use as extra staff and 6% stated that they did so because of the financial advantages attached to the scheme. Some firms also used the trial period to select the most promising apprentices.

Although the occupational environment was often blamed, some young people also made a change of trajectory for reasons not relating to the firm. 17% of terminations occurred because young people decided to go in for other occupations or take a job. More than

One out of five apprentices fail to complete the contract

Based on Céreq's "Generation 2004" survey, 17% of the apprentices surveyed left the firm without completing their training contract. The lower the level of training, the greater the risk of breaking the contract becomes: those who were working to obtain level V qualifications accounted for 22%, whereas this figure dropped to 8% in the case of apprentices enrolled at higher educational establishments. Some sectors were found to be more exposed than others to the risk of broken contracts: they amounted to 30% in the hotel, catering and hairdressing sectors, as compared with only 11% in the industrial sector. The size of the host firm is another decisive factor: the rate of occurrence of broken contracts was more than 20% at companies with less than 10 employees and less than 10% at companies with more than 50 employees.

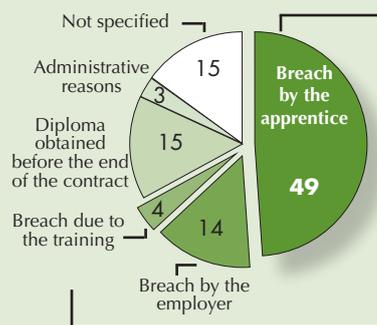
More than one third of the apprentices who failed to complete their contracts declared that they had given up their studies because they had found jobs; more than half of them had nevertheless obtained their diplomas. In fact, three-quarters of this group gave up their training after sitting their final examinations. A similar pattern was observed in this respect regardless of the level of the diploma targeted.

In Céreq's "Generation 2004" survey, 65 000 young people of all educational levels were questioned three years after leaving the educational system. A special module focusing on apprenticeship yielded the numbers of apprentices who gave up without completing their contracts and shed light on the contexts in which this occurred (the sector and size of firm, the apprentices' educational levels, and the stage at which their contracts were broken).

■ The work environment was felt to be unsatisfactory

%

■ Reasons for breaking the contract



■ Reasons by level of diploma targeted

Reason	Total number	Level V	Level IV or higher
Unsatisfactory occupational environment	40	43	32
Change of track Found a job	17	16	22
Personal reasons	12	13	9
Conflicts	12	12	12
Financial problems	6	5	10
Training (difficulties)	6	5	7
Demotivation	6	5	7

Data source: a specific survey on the reasons for broken contracts and analysis of the apprenticeship (DRTEFP) files registered in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region from 2002 to 2005.

half of these youths said they had chosen the wrong occupation and in some cases, this meant training in another occupational field: apprenticeship was only a second choice for 28% of the respondents. They had chosen this path for the following three main reasons: they wanted to earn their living or leave school, or else the decision was made by somebody else. This pattern of decision-making by default undoubtedly weakens apprentices' feelings of commitment. Preferring to have a proper job was another reason, which was mentioned mainly by level IV apprentices.

Personal reasons such as health problems and personal conflicts accounted for about one quarter of the broken contracts. The results obtained in the second, more qualitative survey confirmed that good relations between apprentices and their master trainers contribute importantly to the completion of these contracts. This relationship is sometimes weakened or undermined because of a high rate of absenteeism, reflecting a loss of motivation, and this was the case of 6% of those who failed to complete their training contracts.

The reasons for giving up were found to vary from one sector of activity to another. An unpleasant environment was quoted more frequently in the case of the food industry (in the bakers' and butchers' trades, for example); whereas this objection was rarely mentioned by apprentices in the industrial sector. In the latter sector, as well as in the Construction and Public Works sector, the main reasons given were dissatisfaction with the training provided and economic factors specific to the firm. The sectors in which most apprentices gave up in order to make a change of path were those involving "relational services" (hotels, tea-rooms, restaurants, other services and hairdressing).

Could these failures be prevented?

All these prematurely ended contracts cannot be put in the same basket. Some of them did not even cause problems and therefore did not need to be prevented: when apprentices obtained their diplomas before their contract came to an end, for instance. In this case, giving up apprenticeship did not prevent the aims of the training contract from being achieved. In some other cases, youths gave up because they found other more attractive apprenticeship contracts or job opportunities. Although the aim of obtaining qualifications was not always reached in these cases, these young people's transition to work process was completed. Other annulments were due to the economic situation: some contracts were ended prematurely because the company was obliged to close down, for example. No prevention is called for in these cases.

The period during which a contract is broken is of some importance. If this happens during the trial period, it is easier for apprentices to quickly join another apprenticeship training course.

Appropriate public action should, however, make it possible to prevent some of these contracts from being broken, especially those where an unfavourable occupational environment, the young person's guidance and training or logistic problems such as transport problems are to blame. Some steps have already been taken on these lines. The Regional Councils have been taking active measures to solve apprentices' transport problems by covering all or part of their travel expenses and developing boarding facilities in order to favour young people's geographical mobility.

Some occupational branches have been working together with the CFAs to promote awareness of these problems among partner firms and thus improve apprentices' conditions

Understanding why apprenticeship contracts are broken

The aim of this study was to provide the State and Regional departments responsible for apprenticeship training with some explanations for the broken contracts occurring in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region and to put forward some recommendations as to how the rates of occurrence might be prevented and reduced.

3 167 youths whose apprenticeship training contracts had not been fulfilled were questioned. Inclusion in this survey was based on the apprenticeship contract records kept by the Departmental Directorates for Labour and Employment (DDTE) in Lille, Valenciennes and the Pas-de-Calais region.

The questionnaire used for this purpose addressed various aspects of apprenticeship, including personal and family factors, those relating to the firm, the Apprenticeship Training Centres (CFAs), the master trainers and the apprentice's experience before, during and after the contract. Firms involved in the scheme were also questioned.

In addition to this statistical survey, a qualitative survey was conducted on youths, master trainers and educators.

The results obtained in these surveys and a summary are available on the website of the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region:

http://www.nordpasdecals.fr/apprentissage/downloads/espaceCFA_telechargement/etudeCEREQ.pdf

http://www.nordpasdecals.fr/apprentissage/downloads/espaceCFA_telechargement/syntheseCEREQ.pdf

of work. These policies have sometimes taken the form of arrangements involving special labels, accreditation and charters for improving "the quality of apprenticeship". One such charter was signed in 2009, for instance, between the Rhône-Alpes region and the employers' organisations involved in the hotel and catering sector.

With the support of the regional authorities, the CFAs are setting up pedagogical initiatives with a view to tailoring apprenticeship training to individual requirements and spotting youths liable to give up at an early stage. Some CFAs have developed internal structures for assisting apprentices by providing them with financial aid (thanks to the sponsorship of the European Social Fund) and advising those with health and accommodation problems where to turn. The public authorities and social partners are drawing up transition-to-work procedures for apprentices whose contracts have been broken. This is one of the objectives of the French legislation on lifelong guidance and training orientation, which was passed in November 2009. Guidance of the so-called junior apprentices is another issue which is being currently addressed. Youths over 15 years of age can now undergo alternance training while still at school to help them discover occupational environments they may wish to subsequently join by signing apprenticeship contracts.

All the protagonists have incontestably become active, and increasing numbers of initiatives are being launched. However, recent surveys have shown that the reasons for broken training contracts seem to have remained unchanged. The efficiency of the policies adopted to deal with these problems would therefore be worth assessing more closely. The latest measures provide a promising starting-point, however,

for developing means of advising, informing, accompanying and supervising apprenticeship training contracts. Further actions certainly need to be carried out on different lines, depending on the reasons for which apprentices' training contracts are not completed.

Future policies should not overlook the importance of the diploma level targeted. The apprenticeship pathway is being increasingly used as a means of achieving the baccalauréat or higher educational qualifications. The reasons for going into apprenticeship, the trajectories involved and the reasons for failure to complete these training contracts differ completely between those who have obtained the baccalauréat and those at lower levels. At level V, apprenticeship often provides youths in difficulty at school with a second chance; whereas those who have reached higher educational levels choose this training path more deliberately because it enables them to combine theoretical knowledge with practical experience as well as becoming familiar with the world of work. One might even say that this is a path to excellence for individual engineers' apprentices, as well as being a good investment for firms. To prevent apprenticeship contracts from being broken, it will therefore be necessary to take the differences between those with different levels of training into account. A reference table setting out the reasons why contracts are broken depending on the training level involved would constitute a useful guide for conducting regular surveys, as well as for assessing the schemes designed to address these issues.

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Further reading

- *L'apprentissage au sein de l'Éducation nationale : une filière sortie de la clandestinité* (Apprenticeship training in the French national educational system: a no longer invisible track), Nef, no. 40, April 2009.
- "Apprentissage : une singulière métamorphose" (Apprenticeship training: a singular metamorphosis), *Formation Emploi*, no.101, January-March 2008.
- *L'apprentissage: une idée simple, des réalités diverses* (Apprenticeship: a simple idea, but diverse realities), *Bref*, no. 223, October 2005.

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