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# Learning for life

By CHARLIE WOODS 27

THIS year is the European Year of Lifelong Learning, which is aimed at promoting the importance of lifelong learning for Europe's future. However, if my experience is anything to go by, because of the subject, you are probably already thinking twice about reading the rest of this article.

One of life's great mysteries is why investment in people seems to turn many people off, while investing in inanimate objects can generate great excitement. Surely it should be the other way round. If for no other reason, the concept of lifelong learning could benefit from as much promotion as possible.

For many people education and training is something that takes place in schools, colleges and universities early on in their lives. They try to get it over with as painlessly as possible and get on with the rest of their lives. They assume that by then they must be totally equipped by their education for anything that life might throw at them.

I am characterising this for a fact yet we probably all recognise certain elements of this attitude. Yet if you consider all the things that have changed in the world in the last 10 to 20 years it becomes apparent just how unrealistic this attitude is.

Significant changes have taken place in the world's political and economic geography, in technology, in the way in which organisations are run and in the markets for products and services, to name but



a few. Along with this change, the pace of change has also grown ever faster. This means that far from the need for education being over, we need to be continually learning in order to make the most of changes in our environment and not be overwhelmed by them.

This learning can be either formal or informal, the value of what we learn informally should not be underestimated. The acquisition of computer skills for many people in the last five years has involved considerable upskilling, yet much of the learning has been very informal.

Initiatives to promote more and better education and training have to be aimed at many elements of the economy and society. However, the key players who need to be convinced are individuals. The owner of the asset that results from human capital investment is the individual, so if the level and quality of lifelong learning is to be effectively raised then it is vital that individuals are convinced of its value.

One of the aims of the Year of Lifelong Learning is to help people understand that by being willing to invest time and/or money in their own

education on an ongoing basis they can take a larger measure of personal control over their lives. Support from employers and governments is a necessary part of this process, but the starting point must be the individual's desire to invest in new skills and experience.

Some far thinking companies have begun to help encourage this. They offer to pay for their employees to take classes in any subject of the employees' choice to help them to enjoy learning, and not be intimidated by it and to actively seek it out. This has paid enormous dividends when it comes to getting employees to actively participate in company specific training programmes.

While there is an overwhelming case for more and better investment in education to improve our individual and collective economic prospects we should also remember education is not just about investing in people to maximise economic benefits. A vibrant education system in which all elements and all ages in society can participate, is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy. The value of a strong education system is not alien to Scotland and the rep-

utation of Scottish education is one of our most important economic and social assets.

At Scotland Europa we will be doing our bit to promote the concept of lifelong learning and promote the positive things that our members are doing in Scotland to improve our investment in people. As part of this work we have recently published a report by our Education Training Group\* to highlight the distinctiveness of the Scottish system and many of the good things that are going on in Scottish education and training.

The report stresses the breadth and flexibility of the Scottish system, its focus on the individual and on quality and its desire to take full advantage of new technology. It is aimed at the EU institutions and potential partners and it invites organisations from other parts of Europe to work with our members to improve the quality and effectiveness of education and training in the EU.

If the Year of Lifelong Learning can succeed in promoting a greater awareness of the value of education and training at all levels and ages and this stimulates increased demand from individuals and employers across Europe for more and better learning we will all be better off as a result.

\* "Learning From Scotland". Available from David Tripp/Jane Aitken, Scotland Europa, 35 Sq. de Meeus, B 1000, Brussels. Telephone 00 32 2 502 94. Fax 00 32 2 502 51 56 (Available in French or English).

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