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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to determine what motivates small firms to offer apprenticeship training. The current state of research provides various indications. While research focusing on the specificity of small firms identifies the important role of the owner and their personality, values, attitudes and experiences, economic research mainly refers to the explanatory factor of profitable cost-benefit relationships in apprenticeship training. Finally, research on the institutional embeddedness of firms points to the importance of institutional framework conditions. Our contribution links these three usually unrelated research perspectives and focuses on Switzerland as a collective skill formation system. We asked heads (owners, managers, or other collaborators) of small firms who make autonomous decisions regarding personnel and budget issues about their motivations in offering apprenticeship training using qualitative interviews. The results show that, at the individual, organisational, and societal levels, different motivations influence the provision of training positions. Furthermore, within small companies, we identified heterogeneous motivational configurations. In conclusion, if the participation of small firms in the provision of apprenticeship places is to be promoted, their heterogeneity and motivations in doing so must be addressed at various levels.

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Introduction

Firms have an important educational function in skill development because they qualify their personnel for present and future labour market needs and, therefore, contribute to economic performance and competitiveness, as well as social integration. However, firms are not homogeneous entities and differ in terms of size and culture. Small firms (defined as organisations employing fewer than 50 employees), such as car workshops, hairdressing shops, bakeries and day nurseries, employ a large percentage of employees (Billett 2001; Bishop 2015) – in most countries, around half of the private-sector workforce. Small firms are therefore highly relevant in providing workplaces (Billett 2001). Despite their importance, assuming the normality of the large-firm paradigm had led the characteristics of small firms being overlooked (Bishop 2017; Granovetter 1984; Nolan and Garavan 2015). In comparison with large firms, small companies differ in terms of resources, the complexity of organisational structure, management style, offers of learning and career opportunities and recruitment strategies (Baumeler and Lamamra 2019; Kelliher and Reint 2009).

Against this backdrop, we intend to provide a deeper understanding of why small companies engage in vocational training and contribute to the social and labour market integration of young people. Therefore, this article addresses the following research question: What motivates heads of

small firms to offer apprenticeship training? Our study links three usually unrelated research perspectives – individual, organisational and societal – on firms and their training activities. This is an in-depth investigation of the motivations of small enterprises, with up to 50 employees, in Switzerland, which is characterised as a collective skill formation system in which firms, intermediary organisations and the state work together to provide vocational education and training, often in the form of dual apprenticeships (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012). We use qualitative interviews with the heads (owners, managers, or others) of small firms who autonomously decide the hiring of apprentices to identify the diverse motivations behind offering apprenticeship training.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we present the current state of the literature regarding individual, organisational and societal perspectives on firms and their vocational training activities. While research that focuses on the specificity of small firms identifies the important role of the owner and their personality, values, attitudes, and experiences (Kelliher and Reindl 2009; Nolan and Garavan 2015), economic research focuses on the explanatory factor of profitable cost-benefit relationships in apprenticeship training (Muehleemann and Wolter 2014). Finally, research on the institutional embeddedness of firms (Mikl-Horke 2011) and collective skill formation systems (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012) points to the important influence of institutional framework conditions.

Next, we explain our research design and present our empirical analysis in detail. The results show that, at the individual, organisational, and societal level, different motivations on the part of small firms influence their provision of training positions. Furthermore, within our sample of small companies, we identified heterogeneous motivational configurations. In conclusion, if the participation of small firms in the provision of apprenticeship places is to be promoted, their heterogeneity and motivations in doing so must be addressed at various levels.

Conceptual framework

Individual level: the importance of small firms' owner decisions

In real business situations, it is not companies that come together but people with various characteristics, needs, values and personal goals (Mikl-Horke 2011). This general observation is particularly true for small firms. According to Mintzberg (1983), the simple organisational structure is characterised by strong centralisation, which means that important decisions are made from the centre. As Matlay (1999, 287) states, 'In small firms in general, and in micro-businesses in particular, organisational control is likely to rest with one individual, who usually makes most, if not all, the important decisions'. Thus, the merging of ownership and management in very small companies creates an organisational power that is mainly centred on one person (Kelliher and Reindl 2009).

Bureaucratic structures and decision-making procedures are generally absent from small firms. Indeed, studies have emphasised the tendency towards informality that is visible in the management and organisation of small firms (Duc and Lamamra 2021). As Bishop (2008, 665) states, 'Even important decisions were often taken without recourse to explicit and systematic cost/return calculations (though there were of course exceptions to this). Senior managers spoke of a more "gut feeling" style of management'. The owner, who is responsible for the decision making within the firm, tends to rely on subjective criteria (Ruiz and Goastellec 2016) and their intuition and is less dependent on formal decision models. This allows for more individual agency and subjective orientation in the small firm context, which also applies to offering vocational training.

For example, with regard to recruitment, small companies have less standardised procedures than large ones, even as they use more standardised tests to professionalise this process (Imdorf 2018). The criteria used are the same as in large companies, but the order of priorities differs. Motivation is the first requirement, followed by school results and soft skills. Finally, two criteria appear particularly often in small firms: the capital of autochthony (i.e. the set of social and symbolic resources provided by belonging to localised networks of relations, such as

professional networks, relatives, and neighbourhood) (Renahy 2010) and age (Duc and Lamamra 2021).

It follows that the culture of a small company and its human resource decision-making processes are centrally shaped by the personality of the owner and often reflect their motivations, values, attitudes and abilities (Kelliher and Reindl 2009; Kerr and McDougall 1999; Matlay 1999; Nolan and Garavan 2015). The heads of small companies base their decisions strongly on personal dispositions and preferences. Their individual attitudes and subjective orientations are largely based on their previous experiences and social and educational biographies (Bishop 2008).

Furthermore, the learning environment of small companies is often characterised by informal, situated learning (on-the-job learning, such as learning by doing or trial- and error) and does usually not provide a formal qualification (Besozzi and Lamamra 2017; Bishop 2012; Kitching and Blackburn 2002). Only when small firms expand towards the 50-employee mark do they tend to shift towards the provision of higher levels of formal, off-the-job training (Kotey and Folker 2007). The various training regimes do not necessarily restrict the learning opportunities available but, rather, offer a special quality to small firms' learning environment, such as more opportunities for varied learning due to the low level of differentiation of specialised positions. However, as Kitching and Blackburn (2002) showed in a small firms study within the UK, small employers tended to train according to their immediate skill needs (i.e. to improve workers' skills for their current work roles and improve business performance) rather than to attain longer-term aims, such as training to meet future skill requirements.

Organisational level: cost-benefit calculations

The participation of enterprises in vocational training is also the subject of economic research, which is usually based on human capital theory (Becker 1962) and its extensions (Acemoglu and Pischke 1999; Leuven 2005). In these approaches, participation in training is generally understood as the result of calculating the quantifiable costs of participation versus the expected returns (Bishop 2008). Their primary focus is on incentive structures that lead companies to provide vocational training. Economic theory postulates that companies aim to maximise their profits. From this point of view, companies ask the following question: is it more profitable to train apprentices in-house or recruit skilled workers on the labour market?

So-called cost-benefit studies in collective skill formation systems with pronounced apprenticeship provision investigate profitability during vocational training (Muehlemann and Wolter 2014). For Germany, see Wenzelmann et al. (2015); for Austria, Schlögl and Mayerl (2017) and, for Switzerland, Gehret et al. (2019). These studies assume that, if firms provide training, there is a net benefit if the value of the apprentices' productive work during training exceeds the gross costs of training. However, these studies also show that some firms offering in-house vocational training do not generate any net benefit. In this case, the motivation to provide training arises for other causes. It is argued that training is thus seen as an investment in the future and that companies, therefore, train future skilled workers according to their own needs. By doing so, they can save considerable costs in terms of the recruitment and training of workers from the external labour market. In consequence, firms with higher net training costs also show higher take-up rates for apprentices on average (Wolter and Schweri 2004).

However, research in this field indicates that not only economic but also non-economic motives lead companies to provide training. As a company survey in Switzerland (Schweri et al. 2003) showed, there was also a high level of agreement with statements emphasising apprenticeship training as a common task in the economy, a tradition and a service to society. Moreover, recent research indicates that the normative attitudes of the population regarding the state's engagement in vocational education and training can also help explain companies' provision of apprenticeship places (Kuhn, Schweri, and Wolter 2019).

Societal level: institutional embeddedness of firms

The research tradition on the institutional embeddedness of firms points to the significant influence of institutional frameworks on firms' training activities. From this point of view, economic behaviour is seen as being cognitively, culturally, socially, and politically embedded (Zukin and Paul 1990). The economy, as part of larger society, is influenced by its institutional structure, and markets are also regulated and supported by non-economic social institutions (Smelser and Swedberg 2005; Streeck 1991), such as shared beliefs, social relations, and norms, that influence rational action in economic life (Nee 2005). In consequence, market behaviour takes place within contingent historical contexts and is coined by social relations and subjective conditions (Bishop 2008).

The behaviour of companies is significantly influenced by institutional contexts and – *vice versa* – has an impact on them (Mikl-Horke 2011). The institutional structures differ from country to country and influence the way skill formation is carried out (Bishop 2015; Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012).

When companies invest in the training of their employees, they fear that this investment will not be profitable, because these employees may leave or be poached by other companies before the investment has paid off (Streeck 1991). This makes investment in training a collective good. By providing training, an employer contributes to a common pool of skilled workers, which is, in principle, accessible to all other employers, some of which are its competitors. This uncertainty can lead to a situation in which firms invest too little in broader, rather than firm-specific, skills that can benefit other firms and the economy. Consequently, this may result in an undersupply of skilled labour. However, appropriate institutional frameworks can resolve this dilemma and impose more constraints on managerial behaviour than markets would otherwise demand.

Streeck's (1991) analysis of national-level institutional infrastructures that influence firm behaviour was further developed by a number of authors (for an overview, see Tn 2012). Busemeyer and Trampusch (2012) followed these insights and analysed different vocational education and training systems from a comparative perspective. From their point of view, heterogeneous training regimes across countries (so-called liberal, statist, segmentalist or collective skill formation systems) create different institutional frameworks. In liberal skill formation systems, such as those in the United States or the United Kingdom, narrow on-the-job training focused on the immediate requirements of the workplace prevails. By contrast, in collective skill systems, such as those found in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, firms, intermediary organisations and the state work together to provide vocational education and training (Emmenegger, Graf, and Trampusch 2019). Furthermore, these systems provide transferable and certified vocational skills, and training takes place in schools and companies, usually in the form of apprenticeships. In consequence, companies play a central role as voluntary providers of training places. Even in the knowledge economy, collective skill formation systems remain attractive to governments and companies (Bonoli and Emmenegger 2022).

In contrast to liberal skill formation systems, occupations in these systems impart a wide range of skills that go beyond the needs of an individual company (Clarke 2011; Clarke, Winch, and Brockmann 2013). Consequently, firms offering apprenticeships by following a nation-wide standardised curriculum train broader profiles and produce a public good that can meet the needs of other firms as well. In addition, legal frameworks guarantee that social partners negotiate changes in occupation content and monitor the training at the level of individual companies (Culpepper and Finegold 1999). This kind of institutional framework helps to ensure that the production of skills is also driven by wider societal goals (Ashton 2004).

Different institutional structures lead to different outcomes. Within corporatist-style institutional arrangements, for small employers, training is as much a social obligation as a profitable investment, whereas in liberal free-market systems, smaller employers have comparatively little incentive to train beyond their immediate needs (Ashton 2004). As Bishop (2015, 76) states, 'It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that small firms in Germany are around five times more likely to employ apprentices than their counterparts in the UK (and the USA) (. . .)'.

Small firms in the collective skill formation system of Switzerland

Switzerland can be characterised as a prototypical collective skill formation system (Bonoli, Berger, and Lamamra 2018; Gonon and Maurer 2012), which from an international point of view, is distinguished by a pronounced dual vocational education and training approach and, therefore, a high level of firm involvement. The Swiss system adheres to a 'training beyond need' model (Bishop 2015), in which employers train more workers and broader skills than required by immediate market pressures (Streeck 1991).

Vocational education and training is the most popular form of education at the upper secondary level because two-thirds of all young people are trained in one of 230 occupations after completing compulsory schooling (SERI 2019). Among them, 90% attend dual programmes (OECD 2017), which combine part-time apprenticeships at a host company (60–80% of the time spent), part-time studies at a vocational school (20–40% of the time spent) and additional learning at branch courses. Vocational education and training programmes last for between two to four years depending on vocational area and level.

In Switzerland, small firms with up to 50 employees employ around half (47.5%) of the workforce in 2017 (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020a). Regarding vocational training, such firms are even more important: seventy percent of all apprentices were trained in small firms, with less than 50 employees, in 2008 (Müller and Schweri 2012). This presents a different picture than in other countries, for example, in the UK, where small firms' lack of engagement with the training market has been identified (Bishop 2008).

The predominant provision of dual programmes requires a high level of commitment from companies, which offer apprenticeship positions voluntarily and pay the wages of the apprentices and other training costs, such as supervision by an in-house workplace trainer, infrastructure and equipment. In contrast to other collective skill formation systems, such as those of Germany and Austria, Switzerland is characterised by a de-regulated labour market (Schweri 2010). This implies that there is no explicit regulation of the wages paid to apprentices, which are substantially lower than those of fully trained workers (except in the few branches in which a collective labour agreement exists).

As a collective skill formation system, the Swiss VET system relies on collaboration and negotiation between companies; intermediary organisations, such as occupational associations, and the state. Occupational associations, which integrate firms with optional membership, play a leading role in defining and regularly updating occupational training content (drafting vocational education and training ordinances, plans and other firm-related guidelines). For every apprenticeship, a training plan defines the competencies a certain occupation requires and the specific educational content that firms, schools, and the branch courses must provide. Companies that train apprentices in a particular occupation must follow the occupation-specific, nationally defined standardised curriculum. In consequence, the firms engage in formalised training that leads to an occupational qualification.

The approach is as follows: if a firm wants to offer an apprenticeship position and at least one member of staff has completed training as a workplace trainer, that firm applies to the cantonal public authority. If the application is accepted, the firm recruits apprentices on the labour market, and they sign a training contract. Within the company, a workplace trainer is responsible for workplace training according to the curriculum. During their firm-specific immersion, apprentices are engaged in workplace activities and familiarised with current work processes. While doing so, the apprentices also deliver productive work. During the apprenticeship, the cantonal authorities assume a monitoring role. Ultimately, apprentices must take a nationally defined final exam, which also assesses their practical skills, as described in the nationally defined curriculum. If they are successful, they receive a federally recognised certificate for their chosen occupation, which allows them full mobility on the national labour market.

The active participation of apprentices in production from their first year onwards implies that from the perspective of the firms, the costs of apprenticeship training are mostly covered by the benefits of the apprentices' productive work (Gehret et al. 2019). The training of apprentices is therefore financially worthwhile for the majority of companies, regardless of whether the company continues to employ young people or whether the graduates apply to the free labour market after completing the apprenticeship. In fact, apprenticeship graduates in Switzerland are characterised by a high degree of occupational mobility (Bundesamt für Statistik 2020b). Just five and a half years after completing an apprenticeship, 52% of people are already working in an occupation other than the one for which they have trained.

Research design

Because there has been little research into what motivates the heads of small firms to offer apprenticeship training in collective skill formation systems, we opted for a qualitative approach. We conducted qualitative case studies to analyse the phenomenon in depth and understand it from the participants' perspective (Harrison et al. 2017). The qualitative research approach works especially well if the researcher's purpose is to learn about the respondent's beliefs, perspectives and meaning-making (Roulston and Choi 2018), which is the case in our study.

Qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small and purposefully selected samples (Patton 2015). Because small firms are a population that is difficult to access, we first asked occupational associations to suggest firms for our research purpose and then used snowball sampling (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019). With this sampling procedure, we opted to capture the heterogeneity of our research object in terms of a maximum-variation sample regarding branches and size, and we analysed 18 cases. Table 1 provides a more detailed description of our sample. The small companies come from various sectors (agriculture, industry and services) and cover the size spectrum from one to 40 collaborators.

The present analysis is part of a larger project to examine the everyday activities of workplace trainers and identify the various roles they play in apprenticeship training (Besozzi, Perrenoud, and Lamamra 2017; Duc, Lamamra, and Besozzi 2020; Lamamra and Besozzi 2019). Within this larger project, we conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the representatives of small firms (owners, managers and other heads), who have a certain autonomy in terms of budget and personnel affairs and, therefore, decisions about the provision of apprenticeship places and the hiring of apprentices. The interviews lasted

Table 1. Overview of the small firm sample.

Case number	Firm	Number of employees	Number of apprentices	Occupation trained
1	Pharmacy	16	3	Pharmacy assistant
2	Bakery	20	5	Baker-Pâtissier-Confectioner
3	Day nursery	30	4	Social Care Worker
4	Electrician's shop	35	4	Electrician
5	Hair Dressing	1	1	Hairdresser
6	Restaurant	12	5	Waiter
7	Bakery	15	3	Baker-Pâtissier-Confectioner
8	Painter's shop	4	1	Painter
9	Pharmacy	12	2	Pharmacy assistant
10	Restaurant	18	1	Waiter
11	Farm	40	3	Farmer/Logistician
12	Butcher's shop	5	1	Butcher
13	Painter's shop	4	1	Painter
14	Clothes shop	4	1	Retail professional
15	Multimedia shop	5	3	Retail professional, Electronic technician
16	Car garage	10	2	Automotive technician
17	Hair Dressing	4	2	Hairdresser
18	Electrician's shop	1	1	Electrician

between 45 and 90 minutes. We used openly constructed interview guidelines that encouraged the interviewees to share their points of view. The guidelines also included questions about the reasons for offering apprenticeship positions and their motivations to train apprentices daily. Further information about their motives was found in their curriculum vitae, experiences during the representatives' own apprenticeships, and presentation of their company philosophy.

The audio recordings were fully transcribed, and thematic coding was completed using NVivo software. Because we used a qualitative research design, we coded through an iterative process and remained open to identifying categories that emerged from the data (Roulston 2014). In a first step, based on the presented state of the research, we defined three broad categories (the individual, organisational and societal levels) as sensitising concepts (Patton 2015, 439) and assigned text excerpts to them. In a second step, we formed bottom-up subcategories that concretised the superordinate categories. Furthermore, we grouped the cases within the categories in detailing firms' motivational configurations (one-, two- or three-dimensional).

In the following, we present an overview of the main findings. First, we introduce our category system and reveal the frequency with which certain categories were identified. Then, we discuss the individual categories and present quotes from the interviewees. Afterwards, we present the small firms' heterogeneous motivational configurations.

Results

In the following, we present the category system that resulted from the analysis of the 18 interviews with the respondents about their motivation in training apprentices (see Table 2). Because some of them made several statements about various motivations, the category system comprises 48 entries in total. With 21 statements, motivations that could be assigned to the individual level were named most often. This was followed by the 16 statements that could be subsumed under the organisational level and, finally, the 11 statements that could be assigned to the societal level. In the paragraphs below, we present the categories and their subcategories in detail.

The individual level

As the literature indicates, heads of small firms tend to have a high level of decision-making authority, which is also shaped by their personalities, attitudes, values, and experiences. In the interviews, the respondents mentioned motivations that correspond to their individual reasons for offering apprenticeships, which are now presented in detail.

Especially important is their *pleasure in training*. This was mentioned by every second respondent (10 of the 18 firms) and was the most frequently used subcategory in our data. Statements that we subsumed under this subcategory indicate that the respondents like to train and pass on their knowledge and experience. The following quotations illustrate this dimension.

That's the teaching I love – showing my know-how to others. (case 5, hairdresser, *pleasure in training*)

I find that passing on one's own knowledge or experiences is still something fabulous because... it's already gratifying for oneself because one can share what one has learned, one's experiences. (case 3, social care worker, *pleasure in training*)

Furthermore, the respondents stated that they also receive satisfaction from seeing the apprentices make progress.

When I see somebody who's motivated to learn, it motivates me. And when I see the other day, when we did a second hairstyle, well, I could see that it was better than the first one, so I said to myself, the first one wasn't there for nothing. (...) It's seeing that they can do it. That's what motivates me. (case 5, hairdresser, *pleasure in training*)

Table 2. Overview of the category system.

Category	Subcategory	Definition	Frequency
Individual level		This category combines statements that refer to the personality, attitudes, values and experiences of the respondents.	21
	Pleasure of training	The respondents enjoy training. They like to pass on their knowledge and experience. They are pleased when apprentices make progress.	10
	Own experiences	(Good or bad) personal experiences during one's own apprenticeship influence the motivation to train.	5
	Contact with young people	The respondents enjoy being in contact with young people.	4
	Parental role	The respondents are parents and want their children to be well educated too.	2
Organisational level		This category combines statements that focus on benefits to the firm (e.g. profitability, investment in the future of the company and gain in know-how).	16
	Cost-effective support	Apprentices can be deployed productively and cost-effectively in the company because they help with the daily work.	6
	Train skilled workers for their own needs	Firms want to train apprentices for their own needs because skilled employees are difficult to find on the labour market or firms assume that they will need more employees in the future.	3
	Succession planning	The interviewees train apprentices as their successors, and they hope that these individuals will ultimately run the company.	3
	Access to recent trends	Apprentices know about new trends because they belong to the younger generation and can make these trends accessible to the company.	2
Societal level	Informal further education	Questions asked by the apprentices keep the respondents' skills up to date because they are required to refresh themselves on the basics and acquire new knowledge.	2
		This category combines statements about motivations that go beyond individual and organisational motives and are related to the level of society, that is, normative and cultural-cognitive reasons.	11
	Responsibility for the occupation	The respondents consider the training of apprentices to be a self-evident fact. They do so for their occupation, and they consider themselves responsible for the training of skilled workers for the future.	8
	Obligation to train	One interviewee stated that, as president of an occupational association, he is expected to train apprentices.	1
	Social responsibility of a company	One interviewee saw it as a social responsibility of his company to train apprentices.	1
	Good VET system	One respondent pointed out that the Swiss VET system was exceptionally good in terms of an international comparison and should therefore be supported.	1

The pleasure of seeing someone evolve. It's a little bit different than having children, but it's... it's a little bit of the same approach, in fact, an evolution that's interesting to have.(case 15, head of a multimedia shop, *pleasure in training*)

Further subcategories of the individual level that have been mentioned less often include *own experience* (five out of 18 cases), *contact with young people* (four cases) and *parental role* (two cases). Regarding their own experiences, positive or negative experiences during one's apprenticeship period can also give rise to the desire to train oneself, as the following quotations illustrate.

The goal was to pass it on because I had a supervisor who was very motivated at that time, so I think it gives you the desire to want to.(case 5, hairdresser, *own experience*)

I had to learn for myself and open books and say... try things. And, then, when I came out of the apprenticeship, I thought, 'that wasn't normal, and that's not the way it should be'. So, eventually, I wanted to do better than what had been done with me.(case 7, baker-pâtissier-confectioner, *own experience*)

Some respondents also stated that they enjoyed contact with young people.

I promise you it keeps my mind young too. Selfishly, working with young people, it is a change, isn't it! Yeah, because they're fun. It's very good to work with young people.(case 6, owner of a restaurant, *contact with young people*)

Furthermore, some interviewees also referred to their parental role.

I'm also the mother of three adolescents, so it means a lot to me that... well, I'd like them to be able to move on, and it's true, it means a lot to me because my children are in that age bracket, and I'd also like them to be able to experience that.(case 1, head of a pharmacy, *parental role*)

The organisational level

In this category, we have summarised motivations that are directly related to the organisational context and focus on monetary or non-monetary benefits to the firm (e.g. profitability, investment in the future of the company and gain in know-how). The subcategory that was mentioned most often is *cost-effective support*. Every third respondent said that they appreciated the fact that apprentices can be employed productively and cost-effectively in their company because they help in the daily work. While some respondents were more concerned with physical relief at work, others focused on profitability. The following quotations illustrate these motivations:

But still, physically, I'm nevertheless 51 years old. There's a time when it's not going to be possible anymore. Then, they worry about me and tell me to take on an apprentice. On the one hand, because I like to transmit, it's true, and, well, he's going to help you. He's going to relieve you a bit. (case 12, butcher, *cost-effective support*)

I'll tell you something in confidence, though. You mustn't overlook the financial side of things either. You have to be honest, you see. A second-year apprentice... Well, she's indeed almost as profitable as an employee with ten years' experience, and that's not negligible in my business either. There you go. In that, we must be honest.(case 6, head of a restaurant, *cost-effective support*)

I have x thousand francs a month to pay my employees, and it's clear that an apprentice costs about a thousand and a few francs in her second year. If I don't have her anymore, I won't be able to replace her with an assistant at 4,500 francs. I wouldn't be able to do that! And as far as work is concerned, well... that's it! So, it's a balance to find... (case 9, head of a pharmacy, *cost-effective support*)

Three respondents each stated that they train apprentices for the needs of their firm and are willing to employ them later (subcategory: *train skilled workers for own needs*) or train them as their possible successors (*succession planning*). The following quotations illustrate this:

Well, it's already an asset, also, if the person stays with the company afterwards because he works in the same line as we expect of the people we hire. And it's also because it's very hard to find competent people to hire.(case 13, painter, *train skilled workers for own needs*)

I think you understand that... he's my kid to me. He's going to be my successor, so I'm really trying to do the best I can if he's willing and open.(case 12, butcher, *succession planning*)

Other motivations at the organisational level refer to *access to recent trends* (two cases) and *informal further education* (two cases). In the first subcategory, respondents pointed out that the apprentices know about new trends because they belong to the younger generation and can make them accessible to the company. The following citations illustrate these dimensions.

On the part of the apprentice, it is to bring a young image to the company. And then... dynamic. It's something I like very much. At least in our field, it's... I think it's important. We're dealing with innovative, high-tech products. There's got to be a youthfulness to it. (case 15, head of a multimedia shop, *access to recent trends*)

The second subcategory indicates that questions asked by the apprentices keep the skills of the interviewees up to date because they must refresh themselves on the basics or acquire new knowledge.

I find that what is also super-interesting is that, through their questions, their learning, it also brings us, it forces us to go looking for information. We say to ourselves, 'Oh yeah, I don't remember that at all. What is it again?'

And then it forces us to go and look for it, to reread it, to say 'Oh yes, I don't have the answer. We have to think about it' and then we go and ask other colleagues. Yes, it's interesting for the trainer. We continue to learn or to keep our knowledge up to date.(case 3, social care worker, *informal further education*)

The societal level

This category combines statements about motivations that go beyond individual and organisational motives and were related to the level of society, that is, normative and cultural-cognitive reasoning. Nearly every second respondent (eight of 18 firms) referred to their *responsibility for their occupation*. Some of them pointed out that, from their perspective, the need to train apprentices is a self-evident fact. The following quotations illustrate this subcategory:

I think it is only normal to train the next generation as well.(case 9, head of a pharmacy, *responsibility for the occupation*)

Well, then, I feel like saying it's part of our job, right? If you're a shop manager, well... taking on an apprentice is part of our business, like hiring saleswomen or whatever, so... (case 14, head of a clothes shop, *responsibility for the occupation*)

Other respondents see the hiring of apprentices as part of the tradition of their occupation's development or the provision of skilled workers for the entire industry.

I have the feeling that an occupation can evolve precisely because we pass our knowledge from generation to generation and the generation before us has learned some things and made them available to us. We always start at a higher level.(case 2, baker-pâtissier-confectioneer, *responsibility for the occupation*)

A company that doesn't train... Even if [the apprentices] don't stay at my place... It will be someone else who will perhaps train a mechanic who will come as a mechanic to my place. If no one is training anymore, we won't have any mechanics at some point. Our business needs to practice this exercise.(case 16, head of a garage, *responsibility for the occupation*)

Furthermore, some interviewees referred to the sub-categories of *social obligation to train* (as president of an occupational association, one respondent is expected to train), *social responsibility of the company* and *good VET system* (which needs to be supported by training apprentices).

Heterogeneous motivational configurations

Because the respondents expressed heterogeneous motivations at different levels, we wanted to investigate the configurations of these motivations and better comprehend the phenomenon of small firms providing vocational training. Here, the question of whether certain combinations of motivations can be identified was the guiding principle. [Table 3](#) below provides information on the distribution of these motivations per company.

The respondents differ concerning the configuration of their motivations. As can be seen in [Table 3](#), all combinations of motivations (one-, two- and three-dimensional) can be identified. Only one-third (six out of 18) of the companies analysed refer to just one motivation level (individual, organisational or societal). Among them, only two out of 18 companies focus exclusively on benefits for the company. In consequence, the attempt to motivate small firms to offer apprenticeship places only with reference to a rather narrow profitability logic does not do justice to the motivational heterogeneity of the small firm context.

Discussion and conclusion

One important function of companies is the education and training of their employees. Because small firms are widespread and employ a significant part of the workforce in many countries, the question arises as to what motivates them to specifically train young people and enable their

Table 3. Configuration of motivations per firm.

Motivational configuration	Dimension	Number of cases	Firm and Number of categories (I = individual level, O = organisational level, S = societal level)
<i>One-dimensional</i>	Individual	6	
		2	Electrician's shop (I-I-I) Pharmacy (I-I)
	Organisational	2	Hair salon (O) Painter's shop (O-O)
	Societal	2	Car garage (S) Clothes shop (S)
<i>Two-dimensional</i>	Individual-organisational	8	
		4	Butchers's shop (I-O-O) Day nursery (I-O) Electrician's shop (I-O-O) Hair salon (I-I-O)
	Individual-societal	3	Bakery (I-I-S) Bakery (I-S) Painters' shop (I-S-S)
	Organisational-societal	1	Farm (O-O-S)
<i>Three-dimensional</i>	Individual-organisational-societal	4	
		4	Restaurant (I-O-S) Pharmacy (I-I-O-O-S) Restaurant (I-I-I-O-S) Multimedia shop (I-O-S)

integration into the labour market. Therefore, this article asked the question 'What motivates the heads of small firms to offer apprenticeship training?'

We investigated this research question by conducting qualitative interviews with the heads of small firms in the institutional context of Switzerland. To answer our research question as holistically as possible, we focused on three often unconnected research lines: research on the institutional embeddedness of the firm, cost-benefit studies, and research on small firms. Investigating the motivations of those responsible for training in small firms led to three motivational levels: individual, organisational and societal.

Our results for the individual level echo the work emphasising the power of small firm owners' decisions (Kelliher and Reindl 2009; Matlay 1999) and the importance of their personality and values, which influences their human resource decisions (Bishop 2008; Kelliher and Reindl 2009; Kerr and McDougall 1999; Matlay 1999; Nolan and Garavan 2015). The voluntary participation of small firms in Switzerland is shaped by the personalities, experiences, attitudes and values of their heads. Here, we identified the following subcategories: heads who enjoy the pleasure of training, are guided by their experiences during their own apprenticeships, enjoy contact with young people and are influenced by their parental role. This individual level also echoes the literature on the motivation to become a vocational trainer (Besozzi and Lamamra 2017), highlighting that in the context of small Swiss companies, managers are also involved in the training of apprentices on a daily basis.

In addition, we identified motivations related to the organisational level. Here, the benefit for the company is the focus: the answers revealed arguments identified in cost-benefit studies in economics (Gehret et al. 2019; Muehleemann and Wolter 2014; Schlögl and Mayerl 2017; Wenzelmann et al. 2015). The heads of small firms justify their participation in training in terms of direct benefits to their companies, such as cost-effective support in the firm, training skilled workers for their own needs, investing in apprenticeship training as part of succession planning, gaining access to recent trends and benefitting from further informal education.

Finally, we identified arguments that attribute training decisions to the wider societal level and the contribution to the collective good (Bonoli and Emmenegger 2022; Busemeyer and Trampusch 2012; Streeck 1991). The institutional framework of the Swiss collective skill formation system was mentioned in the following subcategories: The respondents see themselves as

responsible for their occupation, they feel obliged to train, have a sense of social responsibility of their company and want to support the perceived good of the vocational education and training system.

Overall, the most frequently expressed motivations were the pleasure of training (individual level), cost-effective support (organisational level) and responsibility for the occupation (societal level). Moreover, our results show that the motivational levels of the head of small firms are intertwined. The identified heterogeneous motivational configurations show that small firms are not homogeneous entities, because their heads have different motivations and often show multi-dimensional combinations. These results are also relevant for policies aimed at increasing small firms' participation in vocational education and training because not only economic but also subjective and institutional factors seem to motivate small firms. Because motivations vary from company to company, it is worth addressing these different motivational levels if apprenticeships are to be promoted.

The knowledge gained from our study is as follows. Considering only one perspective of the conceptual framework does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Only the combination of the often unrelated research traditions of different research lines makes it possible to develop a holistic understanding of the training motivations of the heads of small firms. For example, if one focuses only on the profitability of training as an economic motive, the institutional framework conditions and individual motives become blind spots. Conversely, if one focuses only on the institutional level, the individual – often emotionally coloured – motivations, such as the pleasure heads of small firms take in training, remains unidentified.

As the state of research shows, firm behaviour takes place within contingent historical contexts (Bishop 2008). Our research took place in a particular institutional setting of Switzerland's collective skill formation system, in which dual apprenticeships are long established. Here, the individual, organisational and societal motivation categories of the heads of small firms offering apprenticeship training were identified.

What do our results mean for the potential transferability of these results to other contexts? The question arises as to how the motivations of heads of small firms manifest themselves in other, for example, liberal or segmentalist systems which are characterised by different institutional frameworks. The literature on small firms (especially in the Anglo-Saxon context) has highlighted the importance of the owner-manager, who tends to be short-term oriented and prefers informal training (Besozzi, Perrenoud, and Lamamra 2017; Bishop 2012; Kitching and Blackburn 2002). In contrast, in Switzerland's collective skill formation system, small firms voluntarily offer apprenticeships, which by their nature are formal training offers leading to nationally accepted qualifications. How can these differences be explained? Our study shows that the context in which small firms are embedded is relevant to their training decisions. In thinking about the of small firm involvement more broadly, a research desideratum for the future would therefore be to compare different motivational configurations of small firms' heads in other institutional contexts. Because the behaviour of firms cannot be viewed independently of their institutional contexts, further research is needed to understand the motivations of small firms engaging in vocational training in other national systems from a comparative perspective.

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