

# The Perceptions of Thai Manufacturers toward Training Courses Provided by the Department of Skill Development

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## ABSTRACT

*As Thai manufacturing industry becomes less competitive through increasing labour costs without concomitant improvements in the quality of that labour, the need for government agencies to help redress the problem becomes ever more acute. Thailand has never had an inclusive labour market plan which extends to future vision of the kingdom in future years and identified means of reaching that vision. To rectify this problem, government agencies are required to provide training and development courses to help upgrade the skills and competencies of Thai workers. Unfortunately, the ways in which this has been organized tends to lead to repetition and waste of resources. Examination of one key provider of training, the Department of Skill Development (DSD), reveals the issues facing such an agency. Through a program of qualitative interviewing, manufacturers who had contact with DSD training programs identified a number of shortcomings in that provision and these are used to identify policy issues which may improve the likelihood of government enhancing competitiveness. Improvements include structural organizational changes and reassignments of responsibilities.*

**Keywords:** *Department of Skill Development (DSD); Training Courses; and Manufacturers*

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### บทคัดย่อ

ดังที่ผ่านมาแม้ว่าอุตสาหกรรมของประเทศไทยนั้นจะมีความได้เปรียบในเรื่องของต้นทุนด้านแรงงานที่ค่อนข้างต่ำโดยที่ปราศจากการพัฒนาด้านคุณภาพของแรงงานอย่างจริงจัง ดังนั้นจึงมีความจำเป็นอย่างยิ่งที่หน่วยงานที่เกี่ยวข้องของรัฐจะต้องทำความเข้าใจและแก้ไขปัญหาอย่างชาญฉลาด. สำหรับประเทศไทยนั้นไม่เคยมีการวางแผนด้านตลาดแรงงานเป็นการโดยเฉพาะในการที่จะรองรับวิสัยทัศน์และยุทธศาสตร์ของชาติในอนาคต เพื่อเป็นการแก้ไขปัญหาในจุดนี้ หน่วยงานราชการจำเป็นต้องจัดสรรหลักสูตรการฝึกอบรมและพัฒนาเพื่อช่วยในการยกระดับความชำนาญและความสามารถของแรงงานไทย แต่น่าเสียดายเป็นอย่างยิ่งที่การจัดหลักสูตรและการปฏิบัติที่ผ่านมานั้นดูเหมือนจะซ้ำซ้อนและใช้ทรัพยากรอย่างขาดประสิทธิภาพและประสิทธิผล จากการตรวจสอบหน่วยงานหลักที่เกี่ยวข้องแห่งหนึ่ง คือ กรมพัฒนาฝีมือแรงงานนั้นได้พบหลายประเด็นที่น่าสนใจ โดยการตรวจสอบนั้นจะใช้วิธีการทำวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ โดยเริ่มจากการสำรวจความคิดเห็นของบริษัทผู้ผลิตที่มีการติดต่อหรือใช้บริการของกรมพัฒนาฝีมือแรงงานเพื่อหาจุดอ่อนในการจัดทำหลักสูตรรวมถึงการปฏิบัติงานและใช้ข้อมูลเหล่านี้ในการวิเคราะห์งานด้านนโยบายเพื่อช่วยรัฐบาลได้รับรู้ข้อมูลและข้อเสนอในการปรับปรุงและพัฒนาเพื่อให้ได้มาซึ่งความได้เปรียบ การปรับปรุงและพัฒนาโดยหลักนั้นได้แก่ การปรับปรุงโครงสร้าง และ จัดสรรความรับผิดชอบในงานของแต่ละหน่วยงานใหม่นั้นจึงเป็นสิ่งจำเป็นอย่างยิ่ง

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## I. Introduction

Thailand is entering the post-factory world. From the 1950s to the beginning of the twenty-first century, Thailand's modernization depended on import-substitution and export-oriented growth, largely based on low value-added and low labour cost Original Equipment Manufacturing (OEM). This factory age relied upon a Fordist, Taylorist approach to labour relations supported by a legal framework created in response to the perceived threat of Communist insurgency. The role of labour in promoting economic growth has been effectively ignored and written out of approved histories of the modern age, which focuses instead on the role of centralised elites and, in some cases, to foreign investment. This factory age has passed because Thailand can no longer offer competitively low labour costs with respect to its neighbours,

principally Vietnam and China, which offer large labour pools of diligent and comparatively well-educated workers. Importantly, the proportion of young people in Thailand is declining as demographic change is bringing about a greying society. To this may be added the perennial problems in Thailand of low levels of availability of skilled workers, notably engineers, as well as employees who may be trained up to the managerial level. A 2006 report by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) observed that Japanese executives reported higher levels of problems in Thailand than the ASEAN-average for recruitment of skilled labour and management potential. However, the same report indicated that Thailand was still a desirable place for Japanese executives to be based, compared to competing neighbours (JETRO, 2006). The report went on to conclude that it was overwhelmingly in the area of human resource development (HRD) that the greatest contribution to enhanced competitiveness in Thailand could be made.

The responsibility for HRD in the Kingdom falls principally upon agencies within the Ministry of Labour (MOL). Of particular importance in this regard is the Department of Skill Development (DSD). However, other agencies are also involved in providing training and development activities, including the Ministry of Education (MOE) and various agencies which were established by the Royal Thai Government (RTG) of 2001-2006 to promote competitiveness and to support Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs). Within the MOE, it is the Vocational Education Council (VEC) that has the responsibility for providing training services. Unfortunately, there is considerable overlap and, hence, confusion caused by the same activities being conducted by both DSD and VEC. More generally, the Thai economy suffers from the problems that academic education is valued (and recompensed) significantly more than vocational education and that promotion and salary-increases routinely depend on the seniority system. The consequence of this is that there are many thousands of university graduates entering the labour market each year who take entry level managerial and technical tasks without being qualified to add value to organizations, while still freezing out graduates with vocational training. Further, wage costs in the economy as a whole are depressed by the huge number of migrant workers in the country, both registered and unregistered. It is estimated that more than one million Burmese, Cambodian and Lao workers are present in Thailand and provide low cost labour in both permitted activities (e.g. fishing, plantation work and some agriculture) and in service industries which are illegally provided (e.g. domestic service, retail and service industries).

These problems could be overcome, at least to some extent, if the Thai labour force could demonstrate comparatively high levels of productivity increase. However, this has generally not been the case, despite a notable increase in the years from 2001-2006 (ILO, 2007, p.35). Insufficient attempts have been made, in general, by the private sector in developing strong and recognizable brands or else in identifying suitable new areas of high added-value economic activities for future exploitation. Instead, one of the few areas that has been taken to increase competitiveness of the economy is to provide some HRD for suitable employees. However, anecdotal evidence suggested that this training was not being offered in a wholly suitable way, principally in terms of quality, quantity and access. It appeared that training programs were instituted in a unilateral way by government agencies without much participation by private sector organizations. If the training programs are of insufficient quality to appeal to companies, then the resources will be wasted and worse, company executives may be persuaded to forego training altogether, thereby further hobbling their ability to be competitive. Throughout late 2006 and 2007, there have been a string of company bankruptcies, some bailed out (temporarily) by government, in the clothing and shoes industries, as well as the rubber industry, among others. In combination with political instability in the country and a series of irrational policy decisions, foreign investors began first to delay at least some of their investment choices and then to relocate them elsewhere, notably to Vietnam in the case of projects requiring low labour costs.

Clearly, therefore, it is increasingly important to determine the quality of service provision by government services in the field of HRD. That is the motivation for this research project, which is part of a wider project concerned with the competitiveness of the Thai labour market. The current project investigates the perceptions of executives in Thai manufacturing companies towards the service provision by the DSD and aims to provide policy suggestions as to improve that level of service, if research suggests that it ever falls below the optimum. This paper reports on the project and is structured in the following way: the next section outlines the background of the DSD service provision, as well as other services which overlap it; section three details the methodology employed to obtain results; section four describes the principal findings of the project; the fifth section details policy implications arising from the findings and the paper is completed by the bibliography.

## II. Background of the DSD

The DSD is one of three principal agencies of the Royal Government of Thailand (RGT) which has been charged with the increase in skills training and prevalence in the Kingdom. In addition to the DSD, the VEC under the MOE is also active as too is the Ministry of the Interior (MOI), which also runs some skills-based courses. The 2002 Skill Development Promotion Act mandated the DSD to become directly responsible for promoting skill standards development by establishing the National Skills Standard Testing program with the aim of extending employment opportunities for job-seekers, promoting career paths for workers throughout the country and enhancing the skills of the Thai labour force to achieve international standards. Three skill levels have been established-basic, intermediate and advanced-and testing involves both theoretical and practical aspects.

Training courses are divided into three categories: pre-employment training; upgrading training and retraining. Pre-employment training aims to develop foundation knowledge, skills and good attitude as required by the labour market. Training programs involves skills such as construction, painting, mechanics, welding, automobile maintenance, electronics, computer use and industrial services. These programs last between one and four months with 20% of the test based on theory and the remaining 80% on practice. Successful trainees are designated as 'basic skilled labour' (Chantachoknimit, 2004a). Upgrading training aims to enhance the knowledge and skills of existing workers to meet the rapid change in demand for the labour market and for further career development. Training courses last a minimum of 12 hours and cover similar areas to basic skills training. Retraining, on the other hand, aims to enable workers to learn new skills and work practices to switch to new professions and career paths. Programs are similar to upgrading training but more extensive in length (Chantachoknimit, 2004b). As a country dealing with the impact of globalisation, as represented by changing competitiveness and the signing of new Free Trade Agreements, Thailand has a particular need to redirect workers from industries which are no longer viable, which is one of the more important needs of a labour market policy.

The Skill Development Promotion Act of 2002 further stipulated that all manufacturing firms who employ more than 100 workers must provide training to at least 50% of the workforce or else pay a subsidy to the Skill Development Promotion Fund. Training courses that are provided are eligible for tax deduction purposes, while manufacturers have the right to import foreign trainers and experts,

including from their parent company in cases where the necessary expertise is hard to find in Thailand, while other incentives include tax allowances for water, electricity and training equipment, as well as exemption from certain other legal requirements (Department of Skill Development, 2007). The DSD also plays an important role in giving advice and recommendations for training courses for vulnerable groups, including women, young people and people with disabilities, those suffering from HIV/AIDS, drug addicts, the homeless and others. The Halal cuisine cooking courses are examples of this. As the government has come to concentrate more specifically on the issue of unemployment, then it has provided additional secure employment opportunities through the Unemployment Insurance Scheme.

Other responsibilities of the DSD include the development of training personnel, national and provincial skill development coordination, public and private sector coordination, skill development promotion for entrepreneurs and the international cooperation schemes. These are quite wide-ranging and resource-intensive activities. For example, international cooperation schemes include technical cooperation at the global level, with countries such as Japan, South Korea, Germany and Australia and the provision of various fellowships, training scholarships, expert exchange and the transfer of knowledge. At the regional level, the DSD has also been involved since 2000 with establishing and supporting the Cambodian-Thai Skill Development Centre. Thai staffs from the DSD have been involved in providing administrative and technical support to this centre for the past seven years and have been involved in transferring knowledge and competencies from Thailand to Cambodia. These activities require considerable expenditure of resources (see Table 1 below for DSD Budget Disbursement, 2005).

**Table 1 DSD Budget Disbursement, 2005**

| Item | Budget Plan  | Objective  | Amount<br>(Thai baht) |
|------|--|--|-----------------------|
| 1    | Poverty eradication throughout Thailand                                | Offering employment opportunities to the poor                  | 240,941,400           |
| 2    | Building lifelong learning in technical and moral skills and knowledge | Enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the labour force | 841,468,100           |
| 3    | Improve industrial structure   | Enhancing the skills and capabilities of industrial workers    | 252,184,900           |

**Table 1 (Continued)**

| <b>Item</b>  | <b>Budget Plan</b>                                      | <b>Objective</b>   | <b>Amount<br/>(Thai baht)</b> |
|--------------|---|--|-------------------------------|
| 4            | Improve the structure of tourism, services and commerce | Enhancing the skills and service standards of the tourism and service sectors    | 28,799,600                    |
| 5            | Developing logistics                                    | Enhancing the quality of the labour market to meet changing logistics situations | 8,300,000                     |
| <b>Total</b> |   |  | <b>1,371,694,000</b>          |

Source: Bureau of Budget, 2007b.

Approximately 37% of the budget was disbursed to staff, 51% to investments, 2% to subsidies and the remainder to other costs. The Skill Development Fund was also established as part of the 2002 Act and it serves as a means of funding for trainees receiving training, for trainers to develop courses and course materials and any other activities legitimately falling within the purview of the act.

It is unfortunate that some or all of the functions of the DSD are replicated elsewhere, in particular with the VEC. Although it would spark some turf wars among the civil service, it would be better if both the DSD and the VEC (and also the similar activities undertaken by the MOI) could operate under a single roof. However, to achieve such a restructuring would require a very firm level of government control which does not appear very likely to occur in the foreseeable future.

### **III. Methodology**

This project is based on in-depth, qualitative interviews with 30 executives from randomly-chosen manufacturing firms within Thailand. Through the assistance of the DSD, a database of all manufacturing firms was identified and selections randomly chosen from that database. Interviews were scheduled and took place via telephone. Telephone interviewing does not provide the same level of communication feedback and personal interactivity as face-to-face interviewing but is useful in those cases in which respondents are particularly busy and resistant to giving time for the research process.

Interviews were conducted in Thai and the records were subsequently translated into English for subsequent analysis. An initial semi-structured interview agenda was created in English and then translated into Thai when necessary for the interviewer to pursue. Respondents were prompted for additional information wherever possible and encouraged to provide extra comments on any related areas of interest. Half of the sample was of Thai-owned companies and the other half was of foreign-owned. However, for many of the foreign-owned companies, operational decisions concerning training were handled by Thai managers and, in those cases, interviews were also conducted in Thai. A total of 1,103 names of manufacturers were provided by the DSD and these represented those manufacturers which had had some substantial dealings with the DSD concerning training. It was considered important to identify and interview only those respondents who actually had relevant and timely information to impart.

The qualitative interviewing program was supplemented by additional interviews with relevant officials at the DSD, together with analysis of existing secondary data sources.

#### IV. Findings

The reasons which persuaded firms not to send employees to the DSD for training included the following:

1. **Public Relations and Communications.** Twenty out of thirty manufacturers complained there were communication difficulties between themselves and the DSD or its representative. Training courses, for example, were not publicized. It was necessary actually to visit the DSD to obtain information on current and future activities. Three respondents observed that time had been wasted when classes were cancelled at short or no notice. Another noted that fewer than half of factory operators were aware of DSD activities and, outside factory operators, only one in twenty would be so aware.
2. **Curriculum.** All manufacturers in the sample felt that DSD courses were too basic in character and too narrow in scope. The Department of Industry Works has classified 107 types of manufacturing activity but the DSD provides training courses to only 29 of those types of activity. Important sectors that were not covered included tanning, agro-industry,



plastics and others. The 29 specified sectors were: agriculture and farming; machinery for agriculture; factory mechanics; construction; computer skills; power machinery; air conditioning and ventilation; jewelry; automobile ventilation; porcelain; measurement devices; leather work; welding; telecommunications; metalwork; electrician; woodwork and furniture; automotive mechanics; automobile painting; electronic technician; industrial artisan; information technology; service business; business administration and management; vehicle control; mechanics; apparel; textiles; printed matter. There was also the problem of replication with the VEC, which has 404 institutions and colleges throughout the country, many of which are located conveniently close to provincial population bases and industrial centres. By contrast, the DSD maintained 76 centres, many of which are not so conveniently located. Owing to the relative newness of the MOL and the DSD, good locations have often been already allocated to other government agencies. While the budget for the DSD in 2007 is 1,436.4 million baht, that for the VEC is 13,952.2 million baht, despite the fact that both have approximately the same levels of responsibility and the former takes care of 350,000 trainees, half of the 700,000 taken care of by the VEC (Bureau of Budget, 2007a).

3. ***Cost of Training.*** Manufacturers preferred internal training to external training because of the savings in time and money. Internal training also enabled firms to retain knowledge and expertise within the company, rather than having to pay for it repeatedly to an external source.

While, in general terms, manufacturers trusted the DSD to provide good quality service and recognised that the costs were favorable compared to private sector providers, the narrowness of scope of training courses available meant that they did not appeal to the larger firms. Small firms were more likely to be interested, since they had much fewer internal resources and competencies. It was possible for manufacturers to make a direct request to the DSD for a specific course but the reality is that it was very difficult for the DSD to put together tailored programs given the limited amount of resources available. The DSD designed new and existing courses based on the anticipated demand for labour and national skills standards. However, there have been some long-standing problems with the capacity of the

MOL in collecting and disseminating statistics at a sufficient level. There have also been human resource limitations within the DSD in terms of formulating new skill standards, not to mention monitoring and enforcing them. The centralization of the curriculum has meant that the teaching in many provinces is inappropriate for local demand. For example, many thousands of people received DSD training every year in Chiang Rai Province, largely in the centrally-mandated subjects of weaving, basic mechanics and electronic repair. However, the majority of the people who received this training were drawn from the agricultural sector and did not have immediate applications for these new skills. Those who did not return to agricultural work were largely obliged to move to other provinces such as Bangkok, Rayong and Lamphun or else travel overseas to Taiwan. Labour migration, both internal and external, has long been an important dynamic in the Thai labour force and has contributed to a number of social issues and problems. It was a policy of the RTG of 2001-6 to reduce such migration. However, the co-ordination between local DSD offices and the central government has been reduced under the interim government of 2006-8 and the impact has been negative.

Among the sample, there was a strong level of agreement that the government should be involved with training in three principal ways: financial; organizational and information provision.

1. **Financial.** Manufacturers, perhaps inevitably, felt that the government should provide tax incentives for those companies which provide training and positive incentives for companies providing training in areas recognised as being critical skill shortage areas. Other ideas included more flexibility in the training grant program and a streamlining of the bureaucracy involved, support for the continuation of training programs and not just their initiation and more investment in public provision to improve the quality of training equipment and resources.
2. **Organizational.** More can be done to address existing skill shortages and to encourage and support those manufacturers which share common training needs on a long-term basis, while eliminating problems with low quality provision of training services.
3. **Information Provision.** Entrepreneurs and managers feel that they receive little high quality information from government agencies and are confused

as to where they should go to receive it. Although many Thai government agencies are involved in providing this kind of information, there are concerns over the possible replication of sources and confusion about apparently contradictory information.

These findings are consistent with those found in similar studies in other countries. Firms do suffer from some location-specific problems to do with supply chain considerations, quality assurance, provision of necessary inputs and distribution and marketing issues. However, these problems may be likened to common and internationally-established entrepreneurial issues, which suggests that solutions successfully employed elsewhere may be profitably imported to Thailand.

## V. Policy Implications

The complaints made by manufacturers suggest that it is budget which is at the root of the problems with DSD training courses. The DSD is responsible for some 350,000 students annually, for which it receives a budget of some 1,436 million baht, while the VEC has some ten times this amount to deal with twice as many students and trainees. The limited budget is sure to have a negative effect on all aspects of service provision, from the quantity and quality of staff to the equipment and facilities available for the trainees. Further, the training courses provided by the DSD are very similar to those offered by the VEC. To maximize utility in terms of government expenditure and to improve economies of scale and scope, it would be rational to transfer to the VEC all those activities where it is better equipped and resourced. It is acknowledged that political and boundary issues would make this a solution which it is rather easier to state than to implement. The DSD, meanwhile, should focus its activities on these core areas:

1. ***Labor Skills Research for Labour Market Planning.*** This is necessary to determine the level of demand for various types of skills and competencies and, in particular, to relate this to a rational national economic plan which integrates labour market planning within its scope. Planning and curriculum design in this area will further transform the prevalence of outmoded labour skills in the labour force and reduce unemployment and under-employment.

2. ***Guide and provide advice on curriculum issues for training courses and disseminate information appropriately.*** The DSD should use research-driven knowledge to help design curricula for training courses which may be provided subsequently to manufacturers. This knowledge should also be transferred to the VEC in due course through an appropriate mechanism and, subsequently, distributed throughout the labour market.
3. ***National Skill Standard Testing.*** Freed of its burden of carrying out training courses with its limited budget and resources, the DSD can instead focus on National Skill Standard Testing and evaluation of VEC (and private sector) training courses. This will facilitate the ensuring of consistency across service providers and enable the upgrading of service quality to badly-needed international levels. Many countries now require that Thai workers abide by international skill standard levels before they can be admitted for employment overseas.

In terms of organizational management, the VEC should be transferred to the jurisdiction of the MOL rather than that of the MOE for two reasons. First, the MOE is required to have a large and bureaucratic structure owing to the many responsibilities that it is required to discharge. This makes it more difficult for MOE executives to respond effectively to the often volatile nature of the labour market and of changing demand within it. The working of the VEC is quite different from the working of either the Office of Basic Education Commission or the Commission of Higher Education, which have very different perspectives and timeframes to consider. Second, having both agencies in the same Ministry will enable better co-ordination of resources and of planning. This will increase the speed of reaction and will better enable VEC and DSD staff to work closely together.

Currently, manufacturers can send only a few workers for training (no more than 2-5 per time) and they must also invest quite a lot of resources in terms of training fees, transportation, wages, time and foregone output. To reduce this expenditure, many or most manufacturers will prefer to keep all training in-house and on the premises. One result of this is that training is suited primarily to the immediate needs of the employer and this may conflict with the long-term needs of the manufacturer, the employee and the labour market as a whole. This also complicates the task of ensuring consistency of service quality across the range of providers.

VEC and DSD should work together with employers to provide appropriate training courses on the premises of manufacturers and ensure that class sizes are large enough to make the proposition cost-effective. Costs may be shared between the provider and the manufacturers according to an agreed formula. Adjusting the perspective of DSD and VEC staff to a much longer timeframe will also help to introduce a more rational means of cost-accounting which recognizes the long-term benefits of the training interventions.

Finally, communications and public relations issues need to be resolved. All activities are effectively useless if no one knows how to access and use them. After the restructuring suggested here, there should be additional resources available to be deployed to this area. Currently, the DSD has access to a skill development fund which may be drawn upon monthly but which has, to date, only twice been used. It goes without saying that modern information technology and its many applications should be thoroughly integrated into the provision of services and into promotion and communications about them.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Countries throughout the developed world are aware of the need to improve the quality of government services both for the sake of efficiency and also for the overall level of competitiveness of their economies. Processes of globalization mean that countries and firms within those countries compete directly with other countries around the world at every level of the supply chain. One of the critical inputs in a developed or at least developing country is the presence of skilled and motivated labour. Thailand has had a mixed record in this regard over the last three decades. Skilled labour has been in shortage and, responding to simple laws of supply and demand, those workers with skills have played the market for short term gains. Investing companies have, generally, been prepared to ignore this problem for the sake of complementary benefits that arise from investing in the Kingdom. This situation will not continue into the future, as Vietnamese and Chinese competition will freeze out Thai firms in sectors in which moderately skilled labour in a mostly low-cost environment represent the critical factors in investment location decision-making.

The quality of government services becomes, therefore, a direct input into the overall competitiveness of a nation. It is easy to criticize successive Thai administrations

in this regard by pointing out how they have repeatedly failed to identify and carry out a long-term, coherent policy for labour market planning and for intervention in that market when required. It is also possible to point out that many of Thailand's competitors have done little better in this regard. The aforementioned Vietnam and China, for example, have maintained state-centric labour market policies combined with high levels of compulsory education which are currently successful in that they are providing a competitive labour market but which are likely to suffer in the future because of lack of motivation when the inability of individuals to attain the goals they would set for themselves is revealed. That is because people are, in general terms and particularly in China, allocated to positions for which they appear to be suited but which they may not themselves have chosen. Consequently, it is not too late for serious remedial action taken now in Thailand to bear fruit within the next two decades. It is certainly time to continue with the reforms of the 2001-6 administration of the civil service which took steps towards instituting a meritocratic environment and altering structures with a view to promoting long-term goals. There is still a long way to go, particularly in instilling a research-driven policy-making environment throughout government and it is hoped that the current paper and the research from which it has been derived, will go a very small way towards meeting that objective.

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