

Skills vital to digital and sustainability transition and economic recovery

Welcoming the updated EU Skills Agenda for Europe published today, EuroCommerce Director-General Christian Verschueren said:

"In our [joint statement](#) with our social partner UNI Europa at the height of the COVID crisis, we paid tribute to the millions of people working in our sector and called on national and EU authorities provide financial support in helping our workforce to up- and reskill. We will be looking to the Next Generation EU Recovery Fund, to help the retail and wholesale ecosystem in accelerating its digital and sustainability transformation and bolster its resilience in the face of the damage sustained during the crisis. One in seven Europeans works in retail or wholesale. We will need the European Social Fund and European Globalisation Adjustment Fund to be focused on helping our workforce in weathering these challenges."

The lockdown due to the pandemic has accelerated and consolidated the shift to online sales. Employees now need to master digital systems and tools, and, in order to attract customers back into stores, to hone their interpersonal skills and the ability to offer informed advice.

Verschueren continues: *"People must be equipped with the skills needed to take on new roles due to digitalisation, and to interact with new systems using blockchain and artificial intelligence. But they need also to enhancing their soft skills; retail and wholesale will remain a people's business. So, it is about combining high tech and high touch."*

Our sector employs 29 million Europeans. Retailers and wholesalers are leaders in innovative Vocational Education Training (VET), for example, apprenticeships for retail professions are ranked first and second for young people in Germany in popularity among all schemes across industry. Employees in the sector are already trained in core employability skills. At company level, training programs have been tailored to the needs of employees and are teaching basic digital skills essential to their future employability.

Bipartite training funds are often part of collective agreements. The e-commerce merchant apprenticeships and related follow-on professional qualification adopted by Austrian and German social partners in retail and wholesale, are a prime example of social partner-induced innovation to meet the growing skills needs of employers in retail and wholesale. Ongoing experiments in the Dutch retail sector with individual learning accounts in sectoral and company collective agreements, are another example of how these challenges can be met.

Yet, our sector faces skills gaps in many member states. National education and training systems urgently need updating to create curricula and qualifications to meet the needs of employers, and to give young people the best chance of getting a rewarding job. Private sector initiatives by retailers and wholesalers will continue to take up their role in meeting this challenge, but this will not be enough. Co-financing by the ESF+, especially for SMEs, will be vital for offering training for as many people as possible. In allocating EU funding from ESF+ to national programs, EU and national policy-makers should work with retailers and wholesalers to leverage the success of these private sector schemes to ensure that our employees obtain the right skills at the right time.

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EuroCommerce is the principal European organisation representing the retail and wholesale sector. It embraces national associations in 31 countries and 5.4 million companies, both leading multinational retailers such as Carrefour, Ikea, Metro and Tesco, and many small family operations. Retail and wholesale provide a link between producers and 500 million European consumers over a billion times a day. It generates 1 in 7 jobs, providing a varied career for 29 million Europeans, many of them young people. It also supports millions of further jobs throughout the supply chain, from small local suppliers to international businesses. EuroCommerce is the recognised European social partner for the retail and wholesale sector.