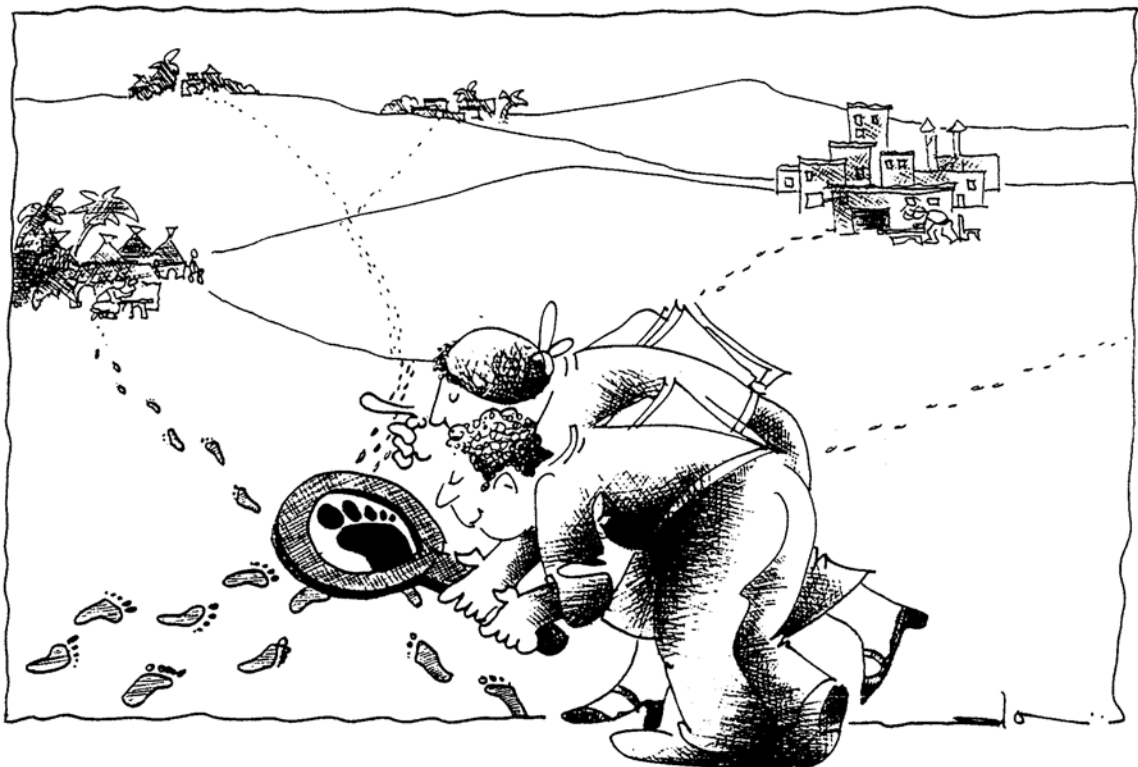




Consult for Management,  
Training and Technologies

# Manual Tracer Studies



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## ANNEX

Sample questionnaire (short version)

This booklet is part of a series on working instruments for a new orientation of vocational training, designed by FAKT. Soon available will be issues on:

- Training Needs Assessments
- Training and Production

*Cover design by Dorsi Germann*

## 1. Why tracer studies?

What happens to your trainees after leaving your vocational training centre? Did they find jobs? Do they use the skills and knowledge they have learned at your centre? What are the skills and competencies demanded in the job market? Is there a saturation of certain trade areas? No one can answer these questions better than your ex-trainees!

Try to imagine your training centre is an enterprise: Trainees are your raw-material, the graduate is your product! Your customer are employers! How would you measure your success. Just by number of items "on stock"? By the number of trainees graduated each year? Shouldn't you better know whether graduates get jobs! Whether they succeed or fail in setting up and sustaining small businesses! The ex-trainees, after graduating from your centre, suddenly face the reality of the market and the "world of work". Many factors will decide upon his or her success. Are there enough jobs? Does their qualification, skills and personality match with the expectation of employers? Do they have enough competence and knowledge to compete with the market and to set up and run a small business?

Vocational Training is not seen as a means and value by itself. More important than certificates is the fact whether vocational training leads to employment, helps to generate and increase income and contributes to poverty alleviation and prevention of social and political unrest.

A **Tracer Study** is a simple tool, designed to measure the relevance of vocational training. They are seen as a management tool for planning and monitoring of training programmes (e.g. which courses to add, to change or to phase out). They provide information for programmatic changes (e.g. adding new elements into your programme) and review of training curricula. They also help to monitor the delivery of training.

By getting into contact with your ex-trainees and by offering them support services you may improve your public image and foster public relation, thus tracer studies are useful as a marketing tool as well.

## 2. The steps of carrying out a tracer study

- ⇒ Establish a register or data base in which you record basic information about your trainees and ex-trainees
  - ⇒ Design tools for information collection
    - ⇒ Select the respondents
      - ⇒ Collect data and information (e.g. by using questionnaires and conducting interviews and group discussions)
        - ⇒ Analyse the data
          - ⇒ Share the findings with relevant groups
            - ⇒ Use the data for adjustments of your training concept and curricula

### 3. Key questions a tracer study should answer

- ◆ What is the effect of the training offered? **Do the trainees find jobs** after graduation and do they earn an adequate income? Even more important: **why do they fail** in the labour market?
- ◆ To what extent **do they apply the skills and knowledge imparted**? Do we train them the right skills? What competencies do they lack?
- ◆ Is there a **need for further training** (i.e. skill upgrading courses) **and other post training support** mechanisms in order to promote employment of our graduates? Or, in case such support services are offered, how effective are they?
- ◆ Do we have to update our curricula, to improve our training delivery?

Tracer studies, as a tool for monitoring and (self)-evaluation, should contribute to find answers on the following issues:

- ◆ Is the training offered **relevant to the needs of the market**? Does it meet the expectations/ employment criteria of potential employers?
- ◆ What are the **labour market trends**? Which trade areas offer growth potential, which ones face stagnation?
- ◆ Is there a measurable and **positive social and economic impact** attributed to the training offered (e.g. on the social status of the ex-trainee, on the living standard/ income)?

### 4. Practical suggestions

#### How to contact your ex-trainees

A handicap for conducting a tracer study is the fact, that often training centres do not keep records (addresses) of their graduates (or contact persons). The following suggestions shall assist you in getting in contact with your ex-trainees

- ◆ Organise “open door sessions”, invite the public and your ex-trainees,
- ◆ Organise “class reunions”
- ◆ Use local radio,
- ◆ Keep records of your graduates and their contact persons, update your register or data base regularly,
- ◆ Institutionalise tracer studies, inform your graduates well before they leave your centre/ project,
- ◆ Offer incentives to ex-trainees for participation in tracer studies \* e.g. by offering post training services (refresher or upgrading courses, etc.),

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\* some VTCs link tracer studies with the issuing of certificates (e.g. a VTC in the West Bank, Palestine issued Trade Test certificates 9 months after graduation, at this occasion all graduates were asked to fill a tracer questionnaire)

## Rules for designing a questionnaire

- ◆ Keep the questionnaire as short as possible,
- ◆ Ask only questions which are of immediate use,
- ◆ Avoid suggestive questions,
- ◆ Use a clear language,
- ◆ Ask for recommendations,
- ◆ Use both, quantitative and qualitative questions.

## Selection of respondents and sample size

- ◆ a tracer study should, at least cover 60% of the graduates per year of graduation.
- ◆ use random samples (avoid "hand-picking" of respondents, that will lead to distorted results).
- ◆ avoid sample sizes per class (trade and year of graduation) below 10 respondents, otherwise your results are not of representative nature.
- ◆ If your institution/centre has never carried out a tracer study before, it is advisable to trace graduates of at least the last 2 – 3 years.

## Frequency and timing

- ◆ We advise to carry out tracer studies on annual basis.
- ◆ Do not carry out a tracer study too early after graduation. For the first 6 months most of your ex-trainees may still look for a job or work in a probationary period with little payment. Don't make it too late either. Ties between the ex-trainee and your institution will loosen as time goes by. According to experiences made, the right timing for tracer study seems to be 9-12 months after graduation.

## Distribution of questionnaires

- ◆ If possible, link the distribution of questionnaires with an event (open days, upgrading courses, class reunions),
- ◆ You will improve the return rate, if you mail questionnaires together with a stamped return envelope

## **5. Methods for data collection**

### **A. Questionnaire survey**

Provided you can reach your ex-trainees by mail, questionnaires are a fairly cost effective method of data collection. Questionnaires, though, have limitations. They are most appropriate for collecting *quantitative data*, e.g. the employment status of your ex-trainee (yes/no answers). Much will depend on how you have designed your questionnaire. Can the questions be easily understood? Can someone misinterpret them? (see below: rules for designing questionnaires). Before you start your survey, test the questionnaire! Use a sample as an interview guide and afterwards make the required corrections.

For gathering more “in-depth” information or verification of survey results we recommend to carry out additional interviews and/or group discussions (see next section).

### **B. Interviews and group discussions**

Questionnaire surveys, as mentioned before, have limitations. The respondent may misunderstand the questions, may not provide all the information you want to get. In-depth *qualitative* information can often only be revealed by a personal talk. **Interviews** and **group discussions** with ex-trainees will give you **better insights** and help you **to verify** the results of your questionnaire survey.

Many practitioners are of the opinion that site visits and interviews are the most effective method of carrying out a tracer study. They recommend to utilise instructors and/or programme planners for that exercise, in order to allow key staff to experience “reality” and thus to help drawing valid conclusions.

By any means, we recommend not to limit a tracer study to questionnaire surveys but to add interviews and/or group discussions at least as an additional source of information and for verification of survey results. We suggest to pre-screen questionnaire responses first and then to select a limited number of ex-trainees (e.g. 25% of the number of questionnaires distributed) for interviews or group discussions. Make sure, that all possible categories of respondents are represented, e.g.:

- ◆ the employed and unemployed,
- ◆ the wage and self-employed,
- ◆ male and female,
- ◆ representatives of all trade groups trained at your institution
- ◆ different years of graduation

Additionally, you can use interviews to document case studies of your ex-trainees.

## **6. Data Analysis**

You have received a good return of questionnaires, you conducted group discussions, what next? You have to **analyse your data** and you have to **draw conclusions** - Note: mistakes made in the data analysis can cause wrong conclusions -. Try to follow a clear structure. We recommend the following methodology for data collection and analysis:

- ◆ Involve instructors and programme planners as much as possible in both data collection and analysis. This way you will provide key staff with a practical learning exercise. Encourage team work (a single person might be subjective).
  
- ◆ Cluster the questionnaires received into the following groups:
  - 1 Year of graduation
  2. Trade area
  3. Gender
  4. (Geographical) Area of origin
  5. Educational background
  
- ◆ Use a matrix for a summary analysis of quantitative data, cluster qualitative answers.
  
- ◆ If you have not done a tracer study before, you may contract an external resource person for technical support of data analysis and facilitation of planning sessions (see next point).
  
- ◆ Share and discuss the results with a group of ex-trainees, use their feed back for further verification of the data,

## **7. Share the results and take actions**

If we just write a nice report and store the data collected and analysed in our bookshelf (as it happens so often), the resources spent would be of little use! Now it is time to share the results and to take actions:

- ◆ Share and discuss the findings with your staff, your board, your stakeholders.
  
- ◆ Formulate conclusions and actions. Use the questions and issues outlined in Chapter 3 as a guideline, e.g. :
  - do we need to review curricula and training concept,
  - do we need to introduce new courses with growth potential,
  - do we have to phase out others which show poor employment trends?
  - What do we have to do in order to promote employment?If that is your first tracer study it might be of help to request the assistance of an external facilitator.
  
- ◆ Work out a plan of action or review your plans

- ◆ You may find that a tracer study is not sufficient to find answers on the key questions. This is the point where you need to think about assessment training needs in the labour market more in detail. Consider conducting a Training Needs Assessment (TNA).

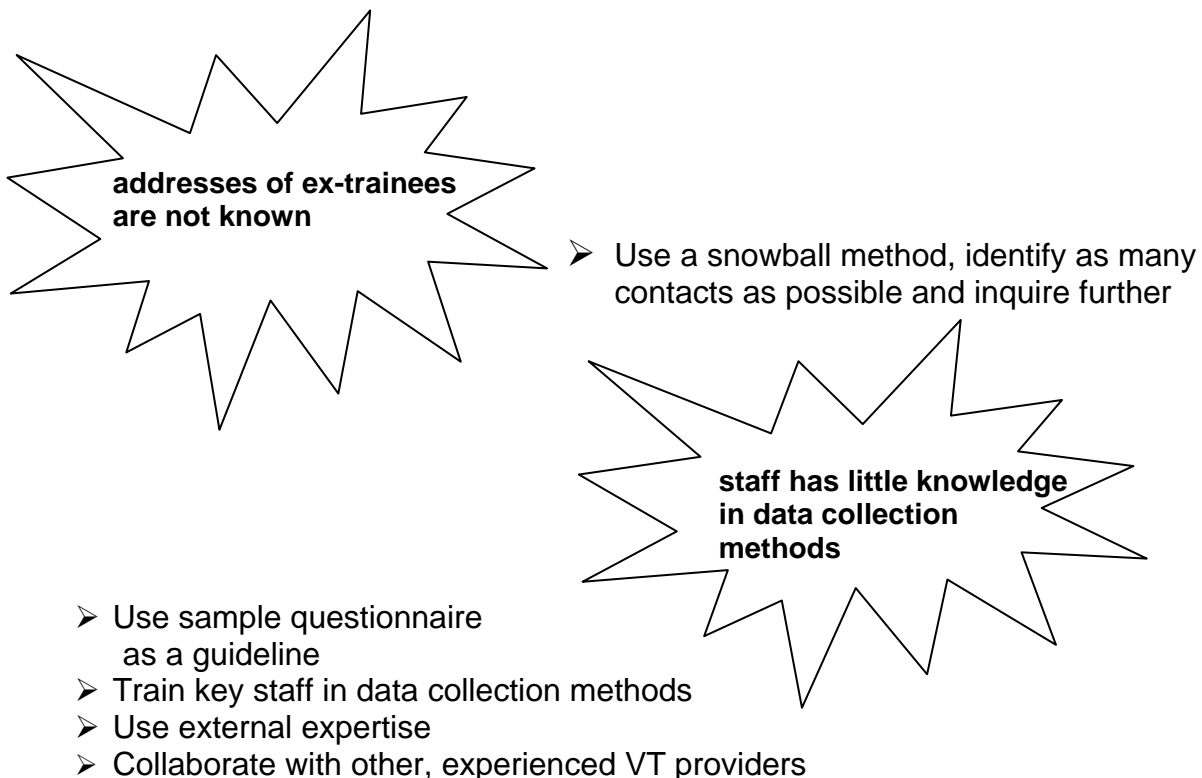
## 8. What next?

Tracer studies should become a key part of the Management Information System of your Vocational Training Centre or skill training program. As you have learned in this manual, tracer studies, regularly carried out, are an effective instrument for monitoring the frame conditions of your work (the trends in the labour market) as well as your own performance (your output). Once you have made your first "tracer" the next one will be of less effort. You can build on the experiences made, you can refine your instruments for getting better results. With the next tracer study you will be able to compare results with previous years and to establish trends. That will support you in making managerial decisions.

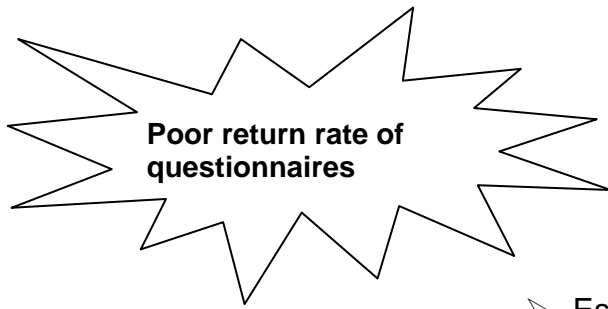
Beside conducting tracer studies, it is worth thinking about a regular exchange with your ex-trainees on a more or less formal basis, e.g.:

- ◆ Invite successful ex-trainees as resource persons (e.g. for lecturing).
- ◆ Encourage alumni associations.
- ◆ Consider to offer post training support measures to ex-graduates (e.g. job placement assistance, operation of shelter workshops for experimenting with business ideas) in order to promote employment.

## 9. Where trouble can arise:







- Establish direct contacts with ex-trainees, e.g. by creation of events (class reunions) or offer incentives (refresher courses)
- Sensitise your current trainees on the need to participate in the next tracer studies
- Use stamped return envelopes

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**SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE  
TRACER STUDY  
-short version-**

1. Name:.....

For all:

2. Current address: P.O. Box:.....  
Town:.....

10. Do you think the choice of being trained in this field was right?  
- yes it was just right   
- no, I should have learned something else   
- I do not know

3. Skill area trained in:.....

4. Year of Completion:.....

5. a. What are you doing for a living now?:  
wage employed   
self employed   
further training/ education   
unemployed

11. Which skills/ knowledge you have acquired/ learnt during the training:  
  
are most useful for you/ your work and applied most?  
.....  
.....  
are not useful? not utilised?  
.....  
.....  
topics that were missing:  
.....  
.....

6. Are you working in the original field of your training?  
Yes  No

7. If wage employed:  
Please specify your present occupation:  
.....  
.....  
What are your terms of employment?  
- casual worker   
- temporary employment   
- permanent employment   
- other:.....

12. Compared to my expectations, the training course I attended:  
  
met my expectations fully   
met my expectations by 50%   
the course was poor

Place of work:  
- at my home town/district   
- I had to migrate to another place for work

Other comments:

8. If self employed:  
I work on my own   
I employ others   
  
please specify the type of business you are doing:  
.....  
.....

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

9. In case you are not employed, what do you do for earning a living at present?  
.....  
.....

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COOPERATION