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# Unlocking the Potential of Continuing Training and Interprofessional Training Funds: An in-depth Analysis based on the Contributions of Key Stakeholders

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**Abstract.** *This paper aims to analyse the continuing training's system in Italy. The study is part of a multi-year research project that aims to assess the role of interprofessional training funds. Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were employed to reconstruct the strategic role of training financed by interprofessional funds in enhancing enterprise competitiveness and worker professionalism.*

**Keywords:** *Interprofessional training funds; Funds for Continuing Training; Continuing Training; Training needs; Demography; Gender; On-the-job training; Fondo Nuove Competenze.*

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## 1. Introduction: The Research Context

The Italian economic and production system - like that of all advanced economies - is undergoing continuous transformation, driven by technological innovation, demographic transitions, changing market dynamics, and an increasing demand for new professional skills. Against this backdrop, continuing training plays a strategic role, serving as a key factor in ensuring business competitiveness and worker employability. According to the *Future of Jobs Report 2023* by the World Economic Forum<sup>1</sup>, the labour market is expected to undergo profound changes over the next five years. One of the most striking findings is that 44% of the skills currently required in the workforce will change by 2027; this highlights the pressing need for individuals to update their skillsets - particularly in areas such as analytical thinking, creativity, and the ability to solve complex problems - which are becoming increasingly central in a constantly evolving labour market. Another significant projection concerns structural changes in employment: 23% of jobs are expected to undergo substantial transformation within the same period. This implies that many occupations will be redefined, some will disappear entirely, and new professions will emerge. In quantitative terms, the forecast points to the creation of approximately 69 million new jobs, but also the loss of around 83 million, resulting in a net decline of about 14 million positions. These transformations will have a direct and substantial impact on education and professional development. In order to remain competitive and employable, workers will be required to invest in their own continuous growth, while businesses will be increasingly called upon to adopt policies that support continuing training, including pathways for reskilling and upskilling, to adequately prepare individuals for future challenges.

Between February and April 2024, Confindustria - i.e., the main organisation representing manufacturing and service companies in Italy - conducted the 21<sup>st</sup> edition of its Labour Survey<sup>2</sup>, analysing the employment of its member companies for the year 2023 and the initial months of 2024. The survey aimed to explore key issues, particularly the

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<sup>1</sup> *The Future of Jobs Report 2023* - World Economic Forum (<https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023/>).

<sup>2</sup> Confindustria, *XXI Indagine sul Lavoro - febbraio-aprile 2024, dati sulle competenze difficili da reperire, premi variabili, welfare aziendale e lavoro agile* (Confindustria, 21st Labour Survey - February-April 2024, data on hard-to-find skills, variable bonuses, corporate welfare and agile working).

difficulty faced by firms in sourcing 'hard-to-find' skills. It emerged that 69.8% of companies experienced difficulty in recruiting personnel, also for roles linked to the digital and green transitions, which demand highly specialised technical expertise<sup>3</sup>. To address these skill shortages, 59.7% of companies plan to invest in training activities aimed at their current workforce, while 49% relied on external consultancy services<sup>4</sup>.

These data confirm the central role of continuing training and the pressing need for both enterprises and workers to engage in pathways of professional development, which are essential to effectively navigate the ongoing transformations.

Despite this, Italy continues to rank among the European countries with the lowest share of workers participating in training activities. The participation rate of Italian adults (aged 25-64) in education and training stood at 35.7%, nearly 11 percentage points below the European average<sup>5</sup>.

An ISTAT<sup>6</sup> survey revealed that many companies with at least ten employees reported significant difficulties in implementing training programmes for their staff. Although the data were collected in 2020, the reasons cited by companies that did not undertake training activities remain noteworthy. The motivations included the perception that existing staff were already adequately qualified and a preference for recruiting workers who were already trained. These were accompanied by organisational and financial barriers, such as high costs (8.6%) and lack of time (8.0%)<sup>7</sup>.

Starting from this contextual evidence, the present article explores the issue of training from the perspective of one of the key actors within the Italian continuing training system; specifically, it focuses on training delivered and managed through the Interprofessional Joint Funds for Continuing Training (*Fondi Paritetici Interprofessionali per la formazione continua*).

These funds<sup>8</sup> are bilateral bodies established through interconfederal agreements between employers' associations and trade unions and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> ISTAT (2023), *La formazione degli adulti - Anno 2022* (<https://www.istat.it/it/files/2024/04/Formazione-adulti-Anno2022.pdf>).

<sup>6</sup> ISTAT is the national institute of statistics in Italy.

<sup>7</sup> ISTAT (2021), *La formazione nelle imprese in Italia. Anno 2020* (<https://www.istat.it/comunicato-stampa/la-formazione-nelle-imprese-in-italia-anno-2020/>).

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the role, functions, and development of the Interprofessional Funds for Continuing Training - without aiming to be exhaustive - see:

authorised by the Ministry of Labour. They manage financial resources derived from the compulsory contribution for unemployment insurance<sup>9</sup>, and allocate them to training initiatives aligned with the evolving needs of workers and enterprises.

At the time of writing, in Italy, the system of Interprofessional Joint Funds for Continuing Training (Fondi Paritetici Interprofessionali) is composed of 20 active funds, of which 17 are dedicated to employees and 3 to managerial staff, as authorised by the Ministry of Labour pursuant to Law No. 388/2000, Article 118<sup>10</sup>. Each fund is established by interconfederal agreements between employers' organisations and trade unions and operates according to a model of bilateral governance. This means that both sides of the labour market - employers and employees - jointly manage the financial resources, define strategic priorities, and oversee the operational mechanisms of the funds.

While this bilateral model ensures democratic governance and alignment with the evolving needs of both workers and companies, it also gives rise to certain dynamics of competition among the funds. These dynamics are particularly visible in relation to the attraction and retention of affiliated companies, the differentiation of calls for proposals, and the marketing of services and support measures. The multiplicity of funds - though grounded in the principle of freedom of association - creates a fragmented landscape that may be difficult for less structured enterprises to navigate, particularly small and micro enterprises unfamiliar with the functioning of the system.

From an operational standpoint, Interprofessional Funds are financed through a compulsory employer contribution of 0.30% of the wage bill, originally allocated to unemployment insurance. Employers opting to join a fund can redirect this contribution toward financing employee training.

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Casano L., *Ripensare i Fondi Interprofessionali per la formazione continua: uno sguardo ai progetti di riforma francesi*, in Bollettino ADAPT, 2018; Nardo C., *Fondi interprofessionali per la formazione continua tra dato normativo e realtà: una prima mappatura*, in Professionalità Studi, 3-4/V, 2022, pp. 200-338; Negri S., *Una riflessione sul sistema della formazione continua in Italia: stato attuale, problemi aperti e possibili sviluppi*, in Professionalità Studi, 3-4/V, 2022, pp. 169-199; Tiraboschi M., *I fondi paritetici interprofessionali per la formazione continua in Italia: bilancio di una esperienza*, in Professionalità Studi, 3-4/V, 2022, pp. 141-168.

<sup>9</sup> Reference may be made to the provisions set out in Article 25 of Law No. 845/1978, which establishes that 0.30% of the compulsory employer contribution is allocated to the training of workers.

<sup>10</sup> According to the [website of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies](#) (last accessed: 22 July 2025), three funds are no longer operational: Fon.In.Coop, FondAgri and Fondazienda.

The resources are accumulated in dedicated accounts (such as the *Conto Formazione* - Training Account) or pooled into collective funding mechanisms (*Conto di Sistema* - System Account), depending on the fund's internal rules and the company's size and training objectives. The funds publish periodic calls for proposals, establish eligibility criteria, and assess and approve training plans submitted by companies, accredited providers, or associations.

Among these funds, Fondimpresa stands out as the largest and most significant in terms of both membership and financial volume, understood as its operational funding capacity. Established in 2002 by Confindustria, CGIL, CISL, and UIL<sup>11</sup>, Fondimpresa currently counts over 200,000 affiliated companies, representing more than 5 million workers (as of 2025)<sup>12</sup>. According to data from ANPAL and INAPP monitoring reports, Fondimpresa alone manages approximately 65% of the total resources allocated to the Interprofessional Fund system in Italy, making it by far the main channel for publicly supported continuing training. In 2022 alone, Fondimpresa approved over 280 million euros in training plans, far exceeding the volumes managed by other funds.

The centrality of Fondimpresa within the national training system is further confirmed by its capacity to channel resources to a highly diversified business base - including large enterprises, SMEs, and micro-firms - and by its proactive role in promoting strategic themes (e.g., digital transition, sustainability, supply-chain innovation) through dedicated calls and partnership projects.

In detail, the evidence presented in this article is drawn from a research project funded by Fondimpresa and carried out between 2020 and 2024 by a partnership comprising Luiss Business School, the Giuseppe Di Vittorio Foundation, the ADAPT Foundation, and EU.R.E.S. Economic and Social Research. Fondimpresa is the fund, established in 2002 by

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis of the results as documented in the project -published and forthcoming- reports for the years 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, and 2023, see <https://www.Fondimpresa.it/rapporti-e-ricerche>.

<sup>12</sup> The reference is to *imprese aderenti* (affiliated companies) as reported on the official website of the Fund consulted on 29 July 2025: <https://www.Fondimpresa.it/>. In more detail, affiliated companies (*imprese aderenti*) are those that have formally joined the fund by registering and paying the required contributions. This affiliation gives them the right to access the fund's resources. Beneficiary companies, in turn, (*imprese beneficiarie*) are those that not only are affiliated but have actually received funding by having one or more training plans approved and financed by the fund.

Confindustria, CGIL, CISL, and UIL<sup>13</sup>, to finance worker training and currently it is the main interprofessional fund for worker training in Italy, with a significant impact on supporting the competitiveness of the productive system.

Given the context in which the research was developed, this article presents the results from a study that, in an innovative manner, adopted an integrated approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses. The aim was to provide a detailed picture of the impact of training financed by Fondimpresa and to explore less visible aspects, such as the unexpressed training needs of companies, in order to outline potential future trajectories for training policies.

## 2. Methodology

The research promoted by Fondimpresa, the key findings of which are outlined in this article, stands out for a solid multi-methodological approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques in a systematic and integrated manner. This methodological integration enabled effective data triangulation, allowing for the comparison and synthesis of diverse forms of evidence, and thereby offering a richer, more multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Unlike other studies that restrict themselves to assessing the effectiveness of training through aggregated metrics, this investigation pursued a broader agenda: to construct a detailed portrait of the impact of training funded by Fondimpresa, to shed light on less visible aspects such as latent training needs within enterprises, and to identify potential trajectories for the evolution of future training policies in a more informed and strategic manner.

The quantitative analysis took the form of a detailed reconstruction of the key dimensions of the phenomenon under observation, drawing on secondary data from institutional sources such as Fondimpresa, INPS, ISTAT, and Eurostat, covering the years 2019 to 2023. By applying

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<sup>13</sup> CGIL, CISL, and UIL, are the three main Italian trade union confederations while Confindustria is the main association representing manufacturing and service companies in Italy. These four organisations play a pivotal role in the management and strategic direction of the fund within a system defined as ‘bilateral’ based on equal participation. Confindustria represents the needs of the business world, while CGIL (*Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*), CISL (*Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori*), and UIL (*Unione Italiana del Lavoro*) ensure that the training pathways funded meet the growth and updating needs of workers.

descriptive statistical methods, the study was able to map the composition and evolution of training expenditure across various funding streams (*Conto Formazione*<sup>14</sup>, *Conto di Sistema*<sup>15</sup>, and *Contributo Aggiuntivo*<sup>16</sup>); profile participating enterprises by examining variables such as economic sector, technological intensity, size, and legal status; analyse the characteristics of funded training in terms of content, duration, and learning methods employed; and explore the features of the target population with reference to age, gender, occupational role, and type of employment contract.

The study also made use of advanced data visualisation tools to effectively represent the territorial distribution of resources, thereby enhancing understanding of regional and sectoral dynamics. The qualitative component provided a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of the phenomenon, grounded in the collection of primary data through fieldwork. Key informants - including institutional stakeholders, regional representatives of Fondimpresa, business leaders, experts, and academics - were engaged through in-depth interviews, focus groups, and facilitated workshops. These methods enabled the direct and context-sensitive capture of experiences, perceptions, and needs. Particular attention was paid to latent training needs - those not yet explicitly articulated by enterprises but regarded as strategically important for enhancing their competitiveness and adaptive capacity. This form of analysis, firmly rooted in territorial, sectoral, and organisational specificities, enabled

<sup>14</sup> The “*Conto Formazione*” (Training Account) of Fondimpresa is a mechanism through which affiliated companies can independently finance training plans for their employees, using resources accumulated via the 0.30% payroll levy allocated to continuing vocational training. These funds are set aside in an individual account registered to the company within Fondimpresa, thereby enabling the planning and implementation of tailored training initiatives aligned with the organisation’s specific needs.

<sup>15</sup> Fondimpresa’s *Conto di Sistema* (System Account) is a collective funding channel based on solidarity, designed to support business development and employee training, with a particular emphasis on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Unlike the *Conto Formazione*, which is managed individually by each company, the *Conto di Sistema* is funded through shared resources and centrally managed by Fondimpresa. It enables companies to come together around joint training plans - whether by sector or region - fostering transparency and equal access to training opportunities. Businesses can apply for funding through public calls issued by Fondimpresa, which set out the criteria and procedures for participation.

<sup>16</sup> Fondimpresa’s *Contributo Aggiuntivo* (Additional Contribution) is a tool designed to help small and medium-sized companies. In fact, notices offering an additional contribution to the Training Account are designed to provide such companies with more opportunities to use their Training Account. Fondimpresa enables companies to submit training plans by supplementing the Training Account resources with those of the System Account, up to a set limit.

training to be understood not merely as a response to immediate demand, but as a strategic investment in innovation. This article reports on the findings of the qualitative strand of the research, highlighting the value generated by investments in training and offering key insights for: refining the Fund's future planning by directing resources towards areas of greatest impact; improving responsiveness to the evolving needs of enterprises through ongoing and in-depth training needs analysis; and reinforcing the legitimacy of continuing training by recognising it as a driver of economic and social development.

As part of the qualitative research strand, a total of 19 in-depth interviews were conducted with national stakeholders between December 2021 and July 2024. The interviews were designed to explore perceptions, practices, and evaluations related to the Italian continuing training system, with specific focus on the role of interprofessional funds.

The interviewees - selected based on their institutional roles and recognised expertise - included representatives from national and regional public bodies (e.g., ANPAL, INAPP, regional departments for labour and training), trade unions, employers' associations, universities, and public or private training providers. For reasons of confidentiality, respondents have been anonymised and identified through alphanumeric codes (R1, R2, etc.)<sup>17</sup>.

The interviews were based on semi-structured guides, developed in line with the research objectives and progressively updated to meet the specific objectives of each of the three annual phases of the research commissioned by the Fund. While the full guides are available on request from the authors, the main thematic sections included:

1. Structural challenges and reforms of the Italian continuing training system;
2. Mismatch between training supply and enterprise needs;
3. Training policies and governance, including the role of regional and national actors;
4. Effectiveness and limitations of the Interprofessional Funds system;
5. Assessment of the training demand articulation capacity among enterprises;

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<sup>17</sup> For a full list of interviewees, including their professional/institutional role and interview date (anonymised), please refer to the national qualitative research reports published and/or forthcoming on the Fondimpresa website (see Part III). The full interview guides used in the fieldwork are available from the authors upon request.

6. Role of soft skills and digital transition in reshaping training priorities;
7. Inclusiveness, accessibility, and participation obstacles;
8. Evaluation of Fondimpresa's role, strategies, and programming;
9. Future training needs linked to labour market transformations;
10. Suggestions for improving training programmes, particularly those funded by interprofessional mechanisms.

The interview process adopted a flexible format to allow each stakeholder to elaborate freely, while ensuring the comparability of responses through shared core questions. Interviews were audio-recorded (where authorised), transcribed, and thematically coded to support subsequent analysis.

### **3. Continuing Training in Italy: Insights from Experts**

As previously noted, the research incorporated opportunities for dialogue in order to construct a comprehensive picture of the continuing training system in Italy. This section presents the key findings from a series of semi-structured interviews conducted with 19 key informants specialising in continuing training. As mentioned, interviews were conducted between December 2021 and July 2024 as part of the national qualitative research component. The interviewees - selected based on recognised expertise - include representatives from national and local institutions, social partners, corporate actors, and academics. The interview outline followed a semi-structured format, designed to reflect the main objectives of the study, including: (a) the perceived value and obstacles of continuing training; (b) the role and effectiveness of interprofessional funds; and (c) the relationship between training policies and enterprise needs. While the full interview guide is available from the authors upon request, a brief description is provided in a footnote.

The interviews yielded a range of observations that can be grouped into key thematic areas, which are outlined below.

During the interviews, all respondents - echoing insights from the relevant literature and in line with national and European policy frameworks - recognised the strategic role of training in an ever-evolving labour market. This was seen as crucial not only for enhancing corporate competitiveness but also for supporting workers in terms of employability, job satisfaction, and career development. Continuing training was frequently described as a protective mechanism for workers navigating the increasingly frequent transitions that characterise modern career trajectories, as well as an opportunity for personal growth. This overall perspective confirms the

widely shared belief among respondents in the strategic relevance of training in supporting individuals through career transitions and continuous professional development. As one respondent put it: *“Training always has a dual purpose: to share content, but also to offer individuals a chance for cognitive and relational reconfiguration. For me, that’s what training is—it’s a moment in which a person pauses and reflects”* (R1<sup>18</sup>, 2021). However, beyond this shared recognition, a second key theme emerged from the interviews: the persistence of structural and cultural barriers that limit both enterprise investment and worker participation in continuing training. At the same time, training was portrayed as a key tool for improving company performance. Businesses with a well-qualified workforce are better positioned to compete with more innovative firms. However, the interviewees also pointed out that while training is widely acknowledged in theory as a crucial driver of both individual and collective development, Italy still faces significant challenges in cultivating a genuine culture of continuing training. As one expert remarked: *“In our country, there is a lack of a professional qualification culture and of continuing training. Despite the rhetoric, very little has been done to actually implement this system - especially in a context where SMEs play such a dominant role”* (R6, 2022).

Accounts from the interviewees consistently highlighted a lack of attention to continuing training among all the key stakeholders. Too few enterprises invest in structured training activities<sup>19</sup>, and the proportion of workers actively requesting access to such opportunities remains low. Furthermore, training occupies only a marginal space in the national policy agenda. As another interviewee observed: *“You can count on one hand the number of workers who raised their hand and said, ‘I wasn’t involved - I want to take this course’. And this is not just a question of willingness or motivation, but often about the difficulty of identifying suitable training opportunities in the first place”* (R4, 2023). This finding is corroborated by official statistical sources<sup>20</sup>, which

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<sup>18</sup> R1 (and other R codes throughout the text) refers to the anonymised classification of interview respondents. All interviews were conducted in Italian; the translations of the excerpts are provided by the authors.

<sup>19</sup> Sistema Informativo Excelsior, Unioncamere, *Formazione continua e tirocini nelle imprese italiane. Formazione sul luogo di lavoro e attivazione di tirocini. Indagine 2023*, p. 10 ([https://excelsior.unioncamere.net/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/2023/Formazione\\_continua\\_e\\_tirocini.pdf](https://excelsior.unioncamere.net/sites/default/files/pubblicazioni/2023/Formazione_continua_e_tirocini.pdf)). According to data from the report, 50.4% of enterprises engaged in training in 2022. At the time of writing, this remains the most recent report available, despite referring to data from 2022.

<sup>20</sup> According to Eurostat data, in 2022 the participation rate of adults aged 25 to 64 in education and training over the previous four weeks stood at 9.6% in Italy, a slight decrease from 9.9% in 2021 and below the European average, which was 11.9% in 2022

reveal that both enterprise investment in training and adult participation in learning activities in Italy remain well below the European average.

The interviews also revealed that, in Italy, training is still predominantly perceived through the lens of a “right-duty” logic, rather than being recognised as a shared value to be actively promoted by both workers and employers. When invited to reflect on the underlying reasons for companies’ attitudes towards continuing training, the interviewees largely identified firm size as the main explanatory factor. The strong prevalence of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Italy was seen as one of the primary obstacles to the widespread development of continuing training. According to the respondents, SMEs - particularly those with a family-run management model - tend to invest less in training than larger firms, which are more likely to have dedicated human resources departments responsible for staff upskilling and reskilling.

The limited engagement of small firms in training cannot be attributed solely to the informal employment practices often associated with this type of business, nor to the absence of a structured HR function<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, such factors were identified by interviewees as key contributors to the problem. These are compounded by a general lack of awareness regarding interprofessional joint training funds, which are designed to support continuing training<sup>22</sup>. Beyond these structural and cultural challenges, the interviewees also reflected on other features and shortcomings that characterise the continuing training system in Italy.

A third thematic area highlighted by the interviews concerns the complexity of the institutional and regulatory framework that governs continuing training in Italy. According to the interviewees, one factor complicating access to training activities is the lack of a unified regulatory framework in this area. In Italy, references to the training system are

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and 10.8% in 2021. Even when considering the most recent figures, the situation remains largely unchanged: in 2023, the European average rose to 12.8%, while in Italy the rate reached only 11.6%.

<sup>21</sup> For a more in-depth exploration of the topic, readers are referred, without any claim to exhaustiveness, to: Bordogna L., R. Pedersini, *Relazioni industriali e gestione delle risorse umane nelle piccole imprese*, in *Giornale di diritto del lavoro e di relazioni industriali*, 90, 2, 2002, pp. 209-232; Regalia I., *La regolazione del lavoro nelle piccole imprese*, Sinapsi, XIII, 1, 2023, pp. 18-31.

<sup>22</sup> The interprofessional funds were established in Italy by Article 118 of Law No. 388 of 23 December 2000. These funds for continuing training are bilateral organisations set up through interconfederal agreements between employers’ organisations and trade unions, with authorisation from the Ministry of Labour. As of the time of writing, there are twenty active interprofessional funds: 17 dedicated to employees and 3 to managers.

found in various legal sources. The first reference is contained in the Constitution, which in Article 35, paragraph 2, specifies that the Republic “protects work in all its forms and applications. It promotes the training and professional development of workers”. Subsequently, a series of laws, legislative decrees, emergency decrees, and ministerial regulations have been enacted that address the issue of training. Among the most recent legislative measures, particular attention should be given to Law No. 92 of 28 June 2012 and its implementing decree, Legislative Decree No. 13/2013<sup>23</sup>. According to the interviewees, the absence of a comprehensive regulatory framework governing continuing training could serve as a deterrent to its uptake by businesses.

Most of the interviewees, when reflecting on the system of continuing training, also highlighted the multiplicity of actors involved in the planning, organisation, and governance of training. In Italy, there is a “multilevel and multi-actor governance”<sup>24</sup>. The management of training occurs at multiple levels, as various entities and institutions with different roles coexist within this system. Four main actors can be identified, and several other entities are dependent on them for the management of continuing training. In addition to the four primary actors - the European Union, the State, the regions and autonomous provinces<sup>25</sup>, and the social partners - there are other actors, more or less directly connected and with varying degrees of autonomy. These include ANPAL<sup>26</sup>, ANPAL Servizi<sup>27</sup>, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, INAIL<sup>28</sup>, INAPP<sup>29</sup>, INPS<sup>30</sup>,

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<sup>23</sup> These legal references include important provisions related to training. They provide definitions of continuing training, as well as formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Legislative Decree No. 13/2013, in Article 1, recognises continuing training as a fundamental right of the individual.

<sup>24</sup> See: L. Dordit, *L'universo della formazione continua in Italia tra complessità irriducibile e sistema integrato*, 1, 2023, pp. 93-112. A broader perspective is adopted by L. Valente, *Il diritto del mercato del lavoro. I servizi per l'impiego tra progetto europeo e storici ritardi nazionali*, Wolters Kluwer Italia s.r.l., Milano, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> Italy is divided into 20 regions, which are territorial subdivisions granted legislative and organisational autonomy over certain matters, including training, following the amendment of Title V of the Constitution.

<sup>26</sup> The National Agency for Active Labour Policies was operational during the first phase of the research, but is no longer active at the time of writing.

<sup>27</sup> ANPAL Servizi S.p.A. was the company that supported ANPAL in various activities, including the implementation of active labour market policies for job seekers, the strengthening of employment services for particularly disadvantaged groups, and the re-entry of the unemployed into the labour market (The company was operational during the first phase of the research, but is no longer active at the time of writing).

<sup>28</sup> National Institute for Insurance against Workplace Accidents.

employment agencies, other authorised intermediaries, non-profit organisations, chambers of commerce, bilateral entities, interprofessional training funds, accredited training organisations, universities, upper secondary schools, ITS Academies<sup>31</sup>, IFTS<sup>32</sup>, IeFP<sup>33</sup>, all schools at every level, and businesses<sup>34</sup>. Several respondents also emphasised the need to avoid generalisations when analysing training practices, underlining how sectoral, regional, and organisational variables significantly affect access and design.

Another aspect that the interviewees focused on was the frequent risk in discussions about training of generalising reflections, thereby overlooking the exceptions and specificities that characterise different sectors, regions, and individual companies. The interviewees pointed out that the use of training varies significantly across sectors, professional profiles, and regulatory frameworks, which at times require qualifications, educational credentials, and certifications to operate within a specific sector or context. For this reason, the interviewees reflected extensively on the importance of not considering training in an abstract or holistic manner, but rather analysing it in terms of its sectoral, organisational, territorial, and professional peculiarities.

A key section of the interviews focused specifically on the interprofessional funds, with particular attention to Fondimpresa's role, strengths, and limitations within the national training ecosystem. Finally, in line with the research objectives, the interviews delved deeply into the experts' perceptions of the role of interprofessional funds within the system of continuing training. In general, all the interviewees recognised interprofessional funds as a key instrument in the Italian continuing training system, and this was equally true for Fondimpresa, the interprofessional fund on which the research focused, particularly in terms of its capacity to address and monitor the evolving dynamics and trends characterising the labour market: *"In my opinion, Fondimpresa has represented a push for continuing training. Compared to the calls that Fondimpresa creates, I think it has captured trends such as digitalisation and the energy transition. So, it has*

<sup>29</sup> National Institute for the Analysis of Public Policies.

<sup>30</sup> National Institute of Social Security.

<sup>31</sup> Higher Technical Schools (ITS Academy). Tertiary level non-academic Vocational Education and Training (VET) pathways.

<sup>32</sup> Higher Technical Education and Training.

<sup>33</sup> Three-year Vocational Education and Training Programmes.

<sup>34</sup> In Italy, many companies have established in-house corporate academies to provide training for their employees. For further reference, see: A. Corbo, *Le Academy aziendali: nuova frontiera per lo sviluppo della professionalità*, in *Professionalità*, 4, 2019, pp. 48-52.

*certainly embraced the new trends and is supporting companies in this regard” (R4, 2023).*

According to the experts consulted, the importance of interprofessional funds within the training process derives in part from their bilateral nature, which enables them to address the needs of both employers and employees. Bilateralism was described as a key lever for scaling up effective and exemplary practices in addressing the mismatch between the supply and demand of skills through training. As one interviewee observed: *“It has often been said that the match between training provision and the demand for qualified workers from businesses has not always functioned optimally. In my experience, the blame has more frequently been directed at the training system rather than at businesses. It is often argued that the training system—particularly the publicly funded one—has failed to respond adequately to the changing demand for skills from the business sector. From my perspective, it would be more accurate to consider both sides of the issue, rather than focusing exclusively on the training system. We should also consider how the business environment engages with individuals at the outset of their training journey. Perhaps we ought to ask whether businesses themselves have been able to articulate their skills needs effectively. The prevailing assumption is that the training system must autonomously adapt to employers’ demands, yet little support is offered to businesses to help them express those demands clearly. Consequently, policies and targeted interventions that assist businesses in formulating their need for qualified personnel could represent a more appropriate and timely direction for current policy. In my experience, including as a local government official, I have often found that businesses themselves do not always have a clear understanding of the competencies they require. Supporting the business sector in articulating its skills needs could therefore become a priority in vocational training policy—an area that, in my view, remains insufficiently addressed. Where well-established bilateral bodies exist, with a strong tradition and experience over time, the culture of dialogue between employers and workers’ representatives often results in a bilateralism that can genuinely be regarded as a best practice model”.* (R4, 2022)

Despite widespread recognition of the potential of these instruments, the interviewees identified several critical issues which, if addressed, could enable more effective utilisation of available resources. Some participants highlighted that interprofessional funds are neither widely known nor consistently used by all employers. This lack of awareness is considered one of the primary reasons for the relatively low uptake of such funds, particularly among smaller enterprises. As one interviewee remarked: *“I believe the issue is, first and foremost, cultural. We are essentially talking about awareness. (...) The tools exist, but what is lacking is a culture of knowledge regarding these tools; their usefulness cannot be separated from the knowledge of their existence”* (R2, 2021).

Enrolment in the funds - being voluntary - remains limited. As noted in earlier sections, smaller firms show significantly lower rates of participation compared to their larger counterparts. As one respondent observed: *"There is still a stark divide between the capacity of larger companies to access and utilise these instruments, including the funds, and the challenges faced by smaller firms. Given the structure of our productive system, this is by no means a trivial issue. And from there, a whole set of sectoral consequences follow, given the ways in which different sectors are organised. Some sectors make very good use of these opportunities, while others engage only marginally"* (R7, 2021).

According to the interviewees, the reasons behind this divide are multifaceted. On one hand, there is a widespread lack of awareness about the funds; on the other, many small enterprises struggle to navigate the bureaucratic procedures required to access them, particularly those with limited administrative capacity or human resource infrastructure. Several participants emphasised that the complexity of these procedures may in itself serve as a barrier to access. Extending this reflection to possible avenues for enhancing the effectiveness of interprofessional funds, the interviews also explored the potential for developing collaborative frameworks between the funds and regional authorities, with the aim of fostering more effective and locally responsive training pathways. One participant noted: *"The challenge in engaging with the funds lies in the fact that they are structured at the national level, making it difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue across twenty different regional contexts with an entity that operates across the entire national territory. Therefore, a mechanism must be found - be it a variable geometry model or specific agreements - that allows for appropriate coordination without undermining the advantages offered by a nationally organised system"* (R8, 2021).

Finally, adopting a comparative perspective and with a view to better valuing human capital, some respondents suggested that interprofessional funds could draw inspiration from the French model, whereby funds are not only responsible for financing training initiatives but also for providing complementary services to companies. Among the services proposed were skills needs assessments - activities which, although still rarely carried out within Italian firms, are essential for the design of effective training initiatives aimed at closing existing skills gaps. These observations naturally led respondents to propose avenues for strengthening the role and effectiveness of interprofessional funds, especially in light of the challenges posed by ongoing transformations in the labour market.

#### 4. The Training Needs of Italian Enterprises: Insights from Company Interviews

This section provides a summary of the main findings from the training needs analysis, conducted through in-depth interviews with a sample of Italian enterprises. The aim was to complement the general trends identified through quantitative data with the direct experiences of entrepreneurs and HR managers. This approach made it possible to supplement the analysis with interpretative and contextual elements, offering a more comprehensive understanding that reflects the diversity of business contexts. In particular, the interviews involved a heterogeneous panel of 36 medium-sized and large companies, selected from a supply-chain perspective. All were affiliated with Fondimpresa and active in key sectors of the Italian economy: manufacturing, advanced services, energy and the environment, commerce, and organised distribution.

To better understand the insights gathered through the interviews, it is necessary to consider them against a background which, based on quantitative data provided by Fondimpresa, reveals a marked growth in training activities financed by the Fund. This growth is evident both in the number of company registrations (*matricole*)<sup>35</sup>, which increased by 212% between 2011 and 2022 (driven primarily by the enrolment of small and micro enterprises), and in the volume of “approved”<sup>36</sup> expenditure, which exceeded €280 million in 2022 alone. Furthermore, in terms of training content - as illustrated in the figures below - the quantitative data show that the most frequent topic within the *Conto Formazione* (Training Account) was workplace health and safety, while managerial skills and production techniques were predominant within the *Conto di Sistema* (System Account).

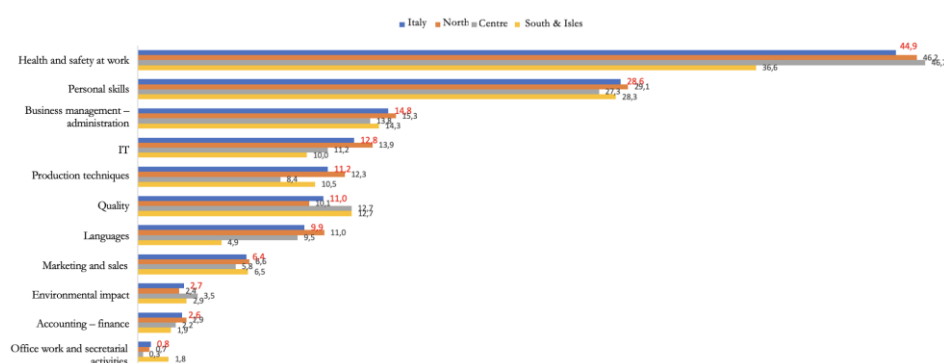
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<sup>35</sup> In the context of Fondimpresa, the term *matricole* refers to the production units or operational sites of a company registered with the Italian National Social Security Institute (INPS). Each site is assigned its own INPS registration number (*matricola*), which is required in order to join the fund, access the training account, and participate in training plans. A company must register separately for each *matricola*. In cases where an INPS registration number is not applicable (e.g., in the case of agricultural enterprises), Fondimpresa assigns a specific substitute code. See, Fondimpresa. *Guida alla gestione e rendicontazione del Conto Formazione, aggiornamento 1 aprile 2022* (Fondimpresa. Guide to managing and reporting on the Training Account, updated 1 April 2022).

<sup>36</sup> Within the framework of Fondimpresa, the term “approved” expenditure refers to the maximum amount of funding granted for a training plan, following a positive evaluation of the proposal submitted by the affiliated company. This approval is issued after a technical assessment, which verifies the consistency of the plan with the objectives outlined in the relevant call for proposals and its compliance with current regulations.

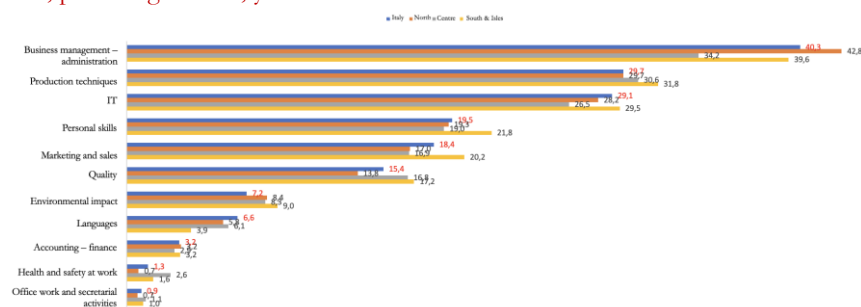
One of the key findings is that training is widely perceived by companies as a continuous process and as an essential tool for responding to market changes. As one interviewee observed, training is a “*never-ending process; one can no longer speak of training cycles with a beginning and an end, because the changes affecting business, services, and therefore management models and skills, are ongoing*” (R1, 2020)<sup>37</sup>.

Figure 1. Frequency of training topics within the “Conto Formazione” in Italy and by area, percentage values, year 2022



Source: Own elaboration from Fondimpresa’s micro-data. NB *The sum of the percentages exceeds 100 because the same business unit is involved in as many different training topics as it has carried out.*

Figure 2. Frequency of Training Topics within Italy’s “Conto di Sistema in Italy and by area, percentage values, year 2022



Source: Own elaboration from Fondimpresa’s data. NB *The sum of the percentages exceeds 100 because the same business unit is involved in as many different training topics as it has carried out.*

<sup>37</sup> 2020 National Report - Chapter “Analysis of expressed training needs: The perspective of businesses” (Capitolo Analisi sui fabbisogni formativi espressi: Il punto di vista delle imprese).

From a methodological perspective, the interviews were conducted using a semi-structured guide and a thematic approach, in order to facilitate a clearer understanding of common trends and company-specific characteristics. The aim was to identify significant insights across the following areas:

- To explore the extent to which enterprises were aware of the strategic role of training in responding to the changes imposed by the socio-economic context, particularly in the post-pandemic phase, which has been marked by an acceleration towards digital and ecological transitions and a growing focus on sustainability;
- To investigate companies' ability to assess the quality of the training provided, in terms of both its relevance to business needs and the suitability of the learning methodologies employed;
- To examine companies' perceptions of the tools made available through publicly funded training - with particular reference to Fondimpresa - in terms of perceived opportunities, encountered challenges, and operational constraints, with a view to improving accessibility.

Following the structure of the interviews, one of the key findings to emerge is that training is widely perceived by companies as a continuous process and as an essential tool for responding to market changes. As one interviewee noted, training is a *"never-ending process; one can no longer speak of training cycles with a beginning and an end, because the changes affecting business, services, and therefore management models and skills, are ongoing"* (2020)<sup>38</sup>.

Nowadays, training is regarded by companies in a dual light: it is seen both as a strategic asset and as a pressing need. As one interviewee put it: *"There are topics that simply must be known, as they are triggered by product or process innovations. This makes it necessary to plan training aimed at reskilling; such training does not necessarily stem from a traditional needs analysis, but is linked to mission changes that bring with them a set of skills and know-how which, in some way, must be revised"* (2020).

The renewed focus on training has undoubtedly been influenced by the growing difficulty in sourcing certain professional profiles and skill sets - a recurring concern raised by several interviewees. This dynamic has a

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<sup>38</sup> All quotations in this paragraph marked with (2020) refer to anonymised interviews conducted in 2020 and are included in the 2020 National Report published on the Fondimpresa website (see the chapter *Analisi sui fabbisogni formativi espressi: Il punto di vista delle imprese - Analysis of Expressed Training Needs: The Perspective of Businesses*).

significant impact on the training system. Companies reported a demand for both highly specialised professionals and low- or unskilled labour, including roles typically associated with artisanal or manual work. One respondent described this trend as a polarisation between two opposing needs: *“On the one hand, there is a demand for extremely high specialisation. In these cases, companies are less focused on hard skills - which can be developed in corporate academies - and more on profiles with strong soft skills and a natural inclination for learning and research. They look for individuals capable of divergent thinking, with creativity, who can integrate into teams and identify problems, not just solve them (...) Naturally, these are people with specific formative experiences (...). On the other hand, there is also a shortage of unskilled labour - people to take on more traditionally manual roles, which may be relatively simple or require basic specialised training”* (2020).

Interviewees also emphasised that companies which invest time and resources in training their employees are better positioned to attract and retain talent. Continuing training not only enables workers to grow professionally, but also signals that the company is committed to their development. When employees feel that their skills and individual qualities are recognised and valued, job satisfaction increases, as do motivation and engagement. As a result, companies benefit from a more positive work environment and reduced turnover, since employees are more likely to stay in an organisation that acknowledges and nurtures their potential. One interviewee remarked: *“Our management places great importance on training, so we always try to pay attention to this aspect. I must say that employees are enthusiastic about taking part in courses and often they are the ones requesting to join training initiatives. Furthermore, during job interviews, one of the most frequent questions from candidates concerns corporate training - they ask whether the company invests in training and what opportunities are available. This is a question that, until a few years ago, one would not typically expect”* (2022)<sup>39</sup>. In a further interview, it was added that: *“Training is also a way to engage people and retain them, especially during times when personal motivation may be low. Offering opportunities for growth and training can provide meaningful support, helping people understand that all is not lost. It is a way of valuing staff and making them feel appreciated”* (2022).

During discussions with interviewees, certain sectors emerged as being particularly in need of workforce reskilling in light of ongoing transformations. As one respondent noted: *“In the energy sector, numerous*

<sup>39</sup> All quotations marked with (2022) refer to anonymised interviews conducted in 2022 and are included in the 2022 National Report, forthcoming on the Fondimpresa website (see the chapter *Analisi sui fabbisogni formativi espressi: Il punto di vista delle imprese - Analysis of Expressed Training Needs: The Perspective of Businesses*).

*technical and industrial training activities are required - for example, in geology and process engineering - alongside behavioural and transversal skills. There are also training domains that could be described as 'future needs', linked to the ongoing transitions. These areas will be a focus for us, as they warrant particular attention given their anticipated impact on the very nature of work - on the 'way of working'. These new training areas, shaped by global developments, will bring about a 'new way of working' (2022).*

The acceleration triggered by the pandemic clearly highlighted the need to acquire new skills rapidly, with particular emphasis on digitalisation, managerial competences for an evolving world of work, and soft skills essential for managing workplace relationships. Increasing attention has been given to the development of multichannel business models and the adoption of digital customer experience strategies - trends which have further underlined the central role of training itself. As one interviewee observed: *"The pandemic gave a strong impetus to the development of multichannel service models, enabling continued interaction with clients and users remotely. Training focused not only on technical skills for using communication tools and collaboration software, but also on soft, behavioural, and relational skills, to make the most effective use of the new service delivery channels"* (2020).

With the growing implementation of digital technologies, online platforms, and cloud-based systems, companies have found themselves managing an increasing volume of sensitive information via digital tools - from internal HR management and intellectual property to financial data and customer transactions. Safeguarding this information has become a critical issue, not only to protect individual privacy but also to preserve corporate reputation and operational stability. As one interviewee remarked: *"Digitalisation is transforming our sector. We need to invest in training to ensure our staff are equipped to manage new digital tools and processes"* (2020). Another added: *"The demand for cybersecurity skills has surged in recent years. Our training strategies must take this trend into account if we are to maintain a competitive edge"* (2022).

In one interview, it was noted that training demand analysis is beginning to highlight the need for education on artificial intelligence, and that the company is starting to respond: *"We have just begun a phase of analysing and collecting training needs for the coming year; we had a very brief exchange with colleagues from across departments who requested more focus on artificial intelligence. How will we address this? On the one hand, we have an open course catalogue where we will introduce some first-level content to raise general awareness of AI. So, in practice, we will begin by clarifying what is meant by artificial intelligence, and especially what it can do for our business. We've already begun in this direction with training on data science and big data - without which, of course, AI cannot be fully understood as an*

*applied tool*". The same interviewee went on to stress the importance of understanding the impact this innovation may have on the business and on working practices in order to identify the skills needed to enhance performance across different professional families: *"Given that our group is international, complex, and organised across many different business lines, it is very important to provide guidance on what AI is - but above all, on how it could affect our business, our processes, and our way of working. We will therefore need to move from process analysis to an examination of the skills required across the various corporate sectors. The response to this need is not immediate, but it is nonetheless essential to begin with a literacy phase, and then move towards targeted training for the different professional families"* (2022).

Sustainability is also taking on an increasingly central role, both in terms of production practices and in workforce training. Companies have shown a clear sensitivity to the importance of integrating principles of social and environmental responsibility into their operations, responding to the growing expectations of consumers and institutions alike. Demand for training in sustainability is expected to grow in the coming years, with particular focus on waste management, energy efficiency, reducing ecological footprints, and adopting circular economy models. The following are additional excerpts from the interviews: *"Each year, the demand for sustainability-related skills increases, and it is estimated that by 2026 companies will require a large number of workers with green competencies. It is essential to offer solutions that address the serious challenges posed by climate change, including - among other things - waste management. These pressing issues require an appropriate response from the economic system and, therefore, from companies themselves. Public policies on sustainability must find in businesses a committed ally capable of accelerating the ecological transition of production processes"* (2021)<sup>40</sup>. Two other interviewees further commented: *"Sustainability is a topic we consider to be very much alive and relevant. From what we observe in the market, consumers are increasingly attentive to the sustainability credentials of companies and tend to value those with sustainability certifications. Consumers are becoming more discerning; our customers - who belong to the premium segment - increasingly ask us to explain how we meet their expectations concerning sustainability and environmental care. Our research and development department is fully engaged in finding solutions aligned with this need. In this context, the training delivered through Fondimpresa has, over the years, been essential in disseminating knowledge within the company about what we have done and how we*

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<sup>40</sup> All quotations marked with (2021) refer to anonymised interviews conducted in 2021 and are included in the 2021 National Report, forthcoming on the Fondimpresa website (see the chapter *Analisi sui fabbisogni formativi espressi: Il punto di vista delle imprese* - Analysis of Expressed Training Needs: The Perspective of Businesses).

*have done it*” (2021). Another interviewee added: “*For us, sustainability represents a competitive advantage, as our clients require us to guarantee the sustainability of our products and production processes. They expect us to comply with both national and international regulations that set specific parameters for final products and production methods. Therefore, sustainability is an area in which we plan to invest increasingly in the training of our managers, employees, and key personnel. We have already launched training courses in this area that we need to complete. In this regard, a shift in mindset is also fundamental - that is, a change in the attitudes of workers and in corporate strategies concerning mobility, as well as the selection of specialised personnel to be placed in various departments. This is a client-driven demand, and we must respond accordingly*” (2021). As one interviewee observed: “*Our company is actively working to align both our processes and products with sustainability requirements. For us, sustainability goes beyond environmental issues; it also encompasses social sustainability. Over the years, we have implemented several initiatives in this area, as social responsibility is part of our philosophy - it’s in our DNA. Our commitment to the local area is reflected in collaborations with schools, technical institutes such as Higher Technical Institutes (ITS), and universities. We also take part in solidarity programmes and corporate initiatives aimed at the local community and our employees. Although we have been active for some time, we are fully aware that there is still much more we can do*” (2022).

As previously mentioned, one of the key topics explored in the interviews was the evaluation of corporate training. Companies reported that they assess training on multiple levels. They gather participant feedback through satisfaction questionnaires and, where planned in advance, evaluate learning outcomes through pre- and post-training tests. Some interviewees shared the following insights: “*We collect feedback from colleagues who attend training sessions using satisfaction questionnaires, which include questions about the overall course, the trainer, materials, and the skills acquired*” (2022); “*...we use standard feedback forms that we ask participants to fill in at the end of each training session*” (2022).

In general, respondents agreed that to ensure the effectiveness of training, it is essential to begin with a thorough analysis of workers’ training needs, followed by a clear definition of objectives, a design process tailored to identified gaps and resources, and continuous monitoring of the activities implemented. However, the interviews also highlighted some critical challenges in measuring the impact of acquired skills on overall company performance. While there is a widespread recognition of the importance of impact evaluation, there is also a shared difficulty in implementing effective tools, particularly when it comes to assessing organisational and strategic outcomes. The relationship between training impact evaluation and the methods used depends largely on the nature of the training topics

and the intended purpose of the assessment. One interviewee illustrated this with a specific example of direct observation as a method particularly suited to technical training: *“In technical training aimed at workers learning to operate new machinery, it is the supervisors themselves who, through direct observation, evaluate whether the new tools are being used correctly”* (2021). Another respondent emphasised that measuring the return on investment in training remains a highly complex challenge for HR professionals. Within their own organisation, efforts are being made to refine a performance evaluation system that includes behavioural aspects: *“Evaluating the effectiveness of training is one of the main challenges for those in charge of corporate training. Our investments in training programmes aim to enhance employees’ skills; particularly for soft skills and technical-operational capabilities within the plant, it is often difficult to measure the economic return in relation to the business. However, skills such as stress management, communication, and collaboration can have a significant impact on overall performance. For this reason, we are working to integrate these dimensions into our performance evaluation system, which no longer focuses solely on the achievement of technical objectives but also takes into account behaviours and soft skills. It is clear that the development of technical competencies, acquired through training or other learning methods, is essential to improving overall outcomes”* (2022).

The interviews also revealed that the effectiveness of learning is closely linked to the teaching methodology employed. In contexts where business needs are continuously evolving, training methods must be carefully selected to support the achievement of desired results.

The debate between traditional classroom-based learning and virtual formats took on renewed importance during and immediately after the pandemic. Once the emergency phase had passed, it became possible to more clearly reflect on the strengths and limitations of each approach. Classroom training facilitates immediate interaction between participants and trainers, encouraging active engagement and the real-time resolution of queries. However, it also involves logistical constraints. In contrast, remote learning offers greater flexibility, reduces costs, and broadens access to educational resources. A blended approach - combining face-to-face sessions with asynchronous online activities - is increasingly viewed as the most effective solution, striking a balance between flexibility and direct interaction, while enhancing the perceived value of in-person learning. Some interviewees elaborated on this: *“Before COVID, we only had in-person training. During the pandemic, we made use of funding for fully online training for obvious reasons, but as of this year we have chosen to return to in-person formats”* (2021). Moreover, *“In the past two years, the training methodology has changed significantly; there is now much more online. We now use many more webinars.*

*The duration of training has decreased, programmes are less time-intensive because they are more focused, and in many cases, we use a blended approach” (2021).*

One interviewee offered an interesting perspective linking the training format to the company’s geographical footprint: *“Training delivered in a classroom setting - even a virtual one - is clearly more engaging than asynchronous learning, and therefore it always receives slightly higher satisfaction ratings. The opportunity to combine asynchronous content with synchronous sessions in a blended format is a winning formula for a company like ours, with a large workforce and a strong presence across the territory. It is a format appreciated by both staff and senior management. However, it is essential to carefully evaluate what to deliver asynchronously - such as preparatory materials or background content - and what to deliver in live sessions” (2020).* Another interviewee offered a reflection related to the profile of the workforce involved: *“In our case, 86% of the workforce is made up of manual workers, so delivering training online to them is not easy” (2021).*

The final theme addressed in the interviews highlighted how publicly funded training is viewed as a particularly valuable tool by companies. It broadens access to high-quality training programmes and makes a substantial contribution to the development of employee skills. According to the companies interviewed, Fondimpresa remains a key partner in this field, offering training opportunities that are closely aligned with business needs. Some interview excerpts confirm this: *“Fondimpresa is an important partner for us; in general, funded training is a crucial lever for us and for the world of business” (2020).* *“Funded training represents an important opportunity for companies to offer their employees training pathways. Training is fundamental for business development because it improves competitiveness. By joining interprofessional funds like Fondimpresa, companies can enhance their employees’ skills and, in turn, strengthen the company’s know-how and the specific knowledge and skills within each department - making the workforce more qualified and motivated” (2021).* *“As a company affiliated with Fondimpresa, we recognise the important role the Fund plays in supporting us as we adapt to changes in the working environment” (2022).*

Nonetheless, certain critical issues remain that can hinder the effectiveness of these instruments. The primary obstacle identified by companies is the complexity of the administrative procedures required to access funding. Preparing training plans and compiling the necessary documentation for expenditure reporting demands specialised expertise and a considerable investment of time - resources that are not always readily available, particularly within smaller enterprises. As one respondent explained: *“Among the areas for improvement is certainly a degree of rigidity in the system’s procedures; excessive bureaucracy often drives companies, especially smaller*

*ones, to rely on external consultants for reporting. However, this issue is common to all funding mechanisms” (2021).*

Another critical area relates to the training design phase. Many companies - particularly smaller ones - struggle to clearly define their training needs, often due to a lack of internal analysis tools or personnel with the appropriate expertise. This highlights a concrete need for support in identifying organisational needs and in designing effective and tailored training programmes aligned with business growth and innovation objectives.

Equally important is the issue of communication. A significant number of companies, especially those with less structured operations, are not fully informed about the opportunities available or the procedures for accessing the Funds. As a result, there is growing demand for widespread information campaigns, local outreach events, and clear digital tools tailored by sector or company size, to guide firms more effectively through the process.

Before concluding, it is worth including one final suggestion made by an interviewee: *“It would be great to have a Fondimpresa courses not only for HR staff who use the tools, but also for all company employees - to spread the culture of the Fund so that it is seen as an opportunity by everyone” (2020).*

## **5. The Response of the Continuing Training System: Insights from the Field Research**

The findings of the field research phase confirm, on the one hand, the persistent skills gap between the profiles sought by businesses and those available in the labour market or produced by the education and training systems. On the other hand, they shed light on several features that have recently characterised the response of the continuing training system to emerging needs <sup>(41)</sup>.

Despite the initiatives and efforts undertaken by the training system - as evidenced by the data presented above and the results of the recent survey - a significant level of skills mismatch continues to characterise the Italian labour market. This mismatch is influenced by multiple factors, including the rapid pace of ongoing transitions (digital, green, and AI-related),

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<sup>41</sup> See R. Angotti, (ed.), *La funzione strategica della Formazione continua per lo sviluppo dei sistemi di conoscenze e competenze*, Special Issue: Economia & Lavoro, LVII, n.1, 2023. CEDEFOP, Italy - 2023 Skills forecast (<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/country-reports/italy-2023-skills-forecast>).

demographic trends, and longstanding inefficiencies and structural weaknesses that have historically affected the national production system. Among the key challenges is the difficulty in precisely identifying training needs, which are constantly evolving and often hindered by a certain rigidity within the system. As one stakeholder interviewed noted, *“often, by the time a training proposal is made, it is somewhat delayed in relation to how needs have evolved (...) in Italy, we still lack an information base that can help identify emerging occupations and growing sectors (...) despite new opportunities, we are still unprepared to develop the skills demanded by the new green economy - we are significantly behind (...) there is a regression, a systemic inability among businesses to keep pace with these evolving training needs and the demands of the market. This is a major limitation that puts us at a disadvantage”* (R1, 2023).

As confirmed by the research, there are also significant disparities in how companies respond to training demands, depending on their size and geographical location. These differences primarily concern the ability of small and micro-enterprises to engage in medium- to long-term planning and to innovate, which in turn affects their capacity to anticipate training needs. These limitations inevitably influence the extent to which employees in such firms can access continuous vocational training<sup>42</sup>.

As for the skills required by businesses and the responses from the training system, the field survey reveals several noteworthy points. Overall, among the experts and stakeholders interviewed, there is a widely held view that a proper alignment has yet to be achieved between the training pathways currently offered and the actual needs of the labour market. This is despite the presence of various positive and innovative experiences, particularly in relation to: corporate investments in enabling 4.0 technologies; the development of “strategic” soft skills (such as adaptability to change, logical thinking, creativity, etc.); and the experimentation with and introduction of training methodologies and pedagogical approaches aimed at enhancing worker motivation and engagement. These are, of course, factors that directly affect the effectiveness of training activities.

The findings also corroborate evidence from other studies, namely that there is a growing polarisation between two broad categories of skills which are now viewed as being on a relatively equal footing: “human” and “digital” skills. These two pillars reflect the new ways in which work is

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<sup>42</sup> From this perspective, it is worth noting that *Fondimpresa*, continuing along the path previously undertaken, also in 2022 introduced targeted measures aimed at promoting both the development of “system-wide” and “supply chain” training, as well as issuing specific calls for proposals tailored to the needs of small-sized enterprises.

being organised. The training system must therefore evolve to strengthen both digital - and more broadly, technical - skills, as well as human skills such as critical thinking, the ability to navigate complexity, and empathy. Overall, the interviewees believe that the system is gradually equipping itself to address the need for updated technical skills, which are, in some respects, easier to acquire and develop than cognitive skills - these being more difficult to standardise within formal training. In this regard, several stakeholders noted the rapid growth of training activities focused on cognitive abilities and socio-emotional attitudes now considered essential. These include, for example, the ability to solve complex problems, critical thinking, creative thinking - *“which is gaining greater importance compared to analytical thinking”* - curiosity, the capacity for continuing training, flexibility, agility, motivation, and self-awareness.

With regard to technical skills, one interviewee highlighted the cross-cutting nature of AI, stressing the need to *“expand the training offer on the understanding that AI is not the sole domain of computer scientists or electronic engineers (...) we should be integrating this subject into various academic programmes - and, some are already doing so (...); no one can afford to marginalise this phenomenon any longer”*. (R3, 2023).

Significantly, there is a growing emphasis on training and information provision for entrepreneurs and managers, aimed at equipping them with the tools needed to navigate rapidly evolving work organisations - both in terms of their structure and the composition of work teams. As previously noted, and particularly in relation to senior and/or coordination roles, the ability to manage an increasingly diverse and complex workforce has become crucial. In this regard, diversity and inclusion management have emerged as strategic skills: *“within a company, there can be as many as seven generations, often with different cultural backgrounds, life stages, and needs. Failing to take this into account negatively affects team performance, beyond any ethical, social, or legal considerations”* (R5, 2023). This awareness appears to be gaining ground among managers as well.

Lastly, it is worth noting that another area of growing interest and demand within corporate training concerns certifications related to environmental standards, gender equality, and social responsibility.

Greater attention in the organisation of training should also be directed towards designing learning pathways that are appropriately tailored to the target audience. This is a fundamental prerequisite for fostering active worker engagement and addressing motivational aspects. The latter was emphasised by one expert, who noted that *“the effectiveness of training within an organisation often depends on its transformative mandate: even unconsciously, workers expect training to bring about some form of positive change”*.

Furthermore, as highlighted by a sector specialist, older workers tend to be *“somewhat more resistant to training, unless they hold more senior or specialised roles,”* and for other profiles, training *“should be delivered using specific methodologies, as they often struggle to engage in traditional classroom settings”*. It was also observed that *“there is a growing need for training to be experiential, to resonate with people’s lived experiences and personal interests - this applies across all generations and genders”* (R2, 2023).

With specific reference to the participation of women in continuing vocational training, the need to introduce flexibility in the scheduling and delivery of training programmes was also identified as a key priority.

## 6. Conclusions and Potential Areas for Intervention

The findings of the research highlight several key considerations regarding the system of active labour market policies, within which continuing vocational training represents a fundamental component. In particular, the study points to a number of potential areas for intervention in the context of training funded by joint interprofessional funds.

In general, among the experts and stakeholders interviewed, there emerged a widespread awareness of the aspects and factors that can help improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the training system. Particular emphasis was placed on the need to expand access to continuing training for both workers and non-workers, as well as the importance of designing personalised training interventions that take into account individual specificities, such as generational affiliation and existing skill levels. Similarly, it was recognised that such interventions should be adapted to the specific characteristics of the business and sectoral context (see paragraphs 3 and 4 above). From this perspective, Fondimpresa, in its role as a bridging actor between the public system and the labour market - and between companies and workers - can make a significant contribution to the creation of an ecosystem that promotes broad participation in continuing training by workers and non-workers alike. Naturally, these goals will be closely tied to the system’s ability to establish a truly integrated education and training framework, to anticipate the needs of regional and sectoral production systems, and to respond appropriately - particularly in a context where the future workforce will require constant upskilling, and career paths are becoming increasingly non-linear.

Other crucial factors include the ability to expand participation, particularly among small and micro-enterprises, as well as among workers—both male and female. Equally important is the challenge of reconciling employers’ operational needs with the individual aspirations of

workers. More than ever, workers are seeking not only fair wages and career progression - both horizontal and vertical - but also improvements in broader aspects of working life, including job quality, work-life balance, equality, and sustainability.

In light of the findings, several areas for action can be identified that require consideration to develop strategies, experiences, tools, and measures capable of responding effectively to the needs of the productive fabric, workers, and the workforce in general. In this regard, it is important to reiterate that these intervention spaces exist within a context characterised by immense complexity and interconnected issues. Among these are negative demographic dynamics, still low levels of education, and the growing mismatch between labour market demand and supply, influenced by cultural changes and migration patterns. There are fewer young people and graduates, alongside an increase in mobility towards countries offering better employment opportunities.

On the difficulty in sourcing certain skill sets - particularly digital, green, specialised and managerial competences, as well as a range of soft skills - and on the growing mismatch between labour supply and demand, also highlighted by both the experts and companies interviewed (see paragraph 3 and 5 above). Moreover, the growth of this mismatch is further exacerbated by widespread job insecurity, low wages<sup>43</sup> (the only category to have decreased over the past thirty years among OECD countries), career difficulties, and involuntary part-time work, which affects women to the extent of 15.6% (ISTAT - BES, 2023)<sup>44</sup>. This complex situation requires the development of both short-term and long-term intervention strategies, addressing educational and productive supply chains, generational concerns, and gender issues.

One key area for intervention concerns strengthening the ability to forecast training needs, particularly for SMEs, which are often unaware of changing trajectories, innovations, and, consequently, the demand for new professional skills. This weakness, in turn, affects their capacity to organise appropriate internal training plans in line with market demands

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<sup>43</sup> Italy is the country where real wages have decreased the most from 2008 to the present (-8.7% compared to an increase of approximately 5% in France and nearly 15% in Germany). See OIL, Organizzazione internazionale del lavoro (ILO), *Rapporto mondiale sui salari 2024-2025. Le tendenze dei salari e delle disuguaglianze salariali in Italia e nel mondo*, Roma: Ufficio internazionale del lavoro, (2025).

<sup>44</sup> ISTAT 2023, *Rapporto BES Il Benessere Equo e Sostenibile in Italia* (<https://www.istat.it/produzione-editoriale/rapporto-bes-2023-il-benessere-equo-e-sostenibile-in-italia/>).

and to recruit suitable personnel. In this regard, the research findings suggest the usefulness of designing and implementing services to support SMEs in conducting their own needs analysis. This would help them build “competency maps”, develop new awareness of strategic issues, and create training plans, including through co-design processes.

One aspect closely related to the previous point concerns supporting SMEs through tailored services and measures to help them build “networks” and integrate into innovative supply chains. This would foster forms of collaboration that enable the sharing of knowledge, technological and financial expertise, values, and organisational and business models with large companies and innovative startups. These latter entities often have greater capacity and speed in recognising new needs compared to traditional small businesses. In this regard, Fondimpresa could strengthen actions, tools, and measures that promote collaboration between SMEs and those entities driving innovation (large companies, but also small innovative startups characterised by a strong commitment to training linked to product or service development). This would facilitate mechanisms for positive cross-pollination.

Another area of intervention concerns the implementation of activities aimed at raising awareness and increasing the understanding of both businesses and workers regarding certain issues and phenomena linked to ongoing changes (technological, demographic, social value shifts, etc.) that will profoundly affect the productive system and the labour market. These changes will necessarily have an impact on the entire system of continuing vocational training. Among these are:

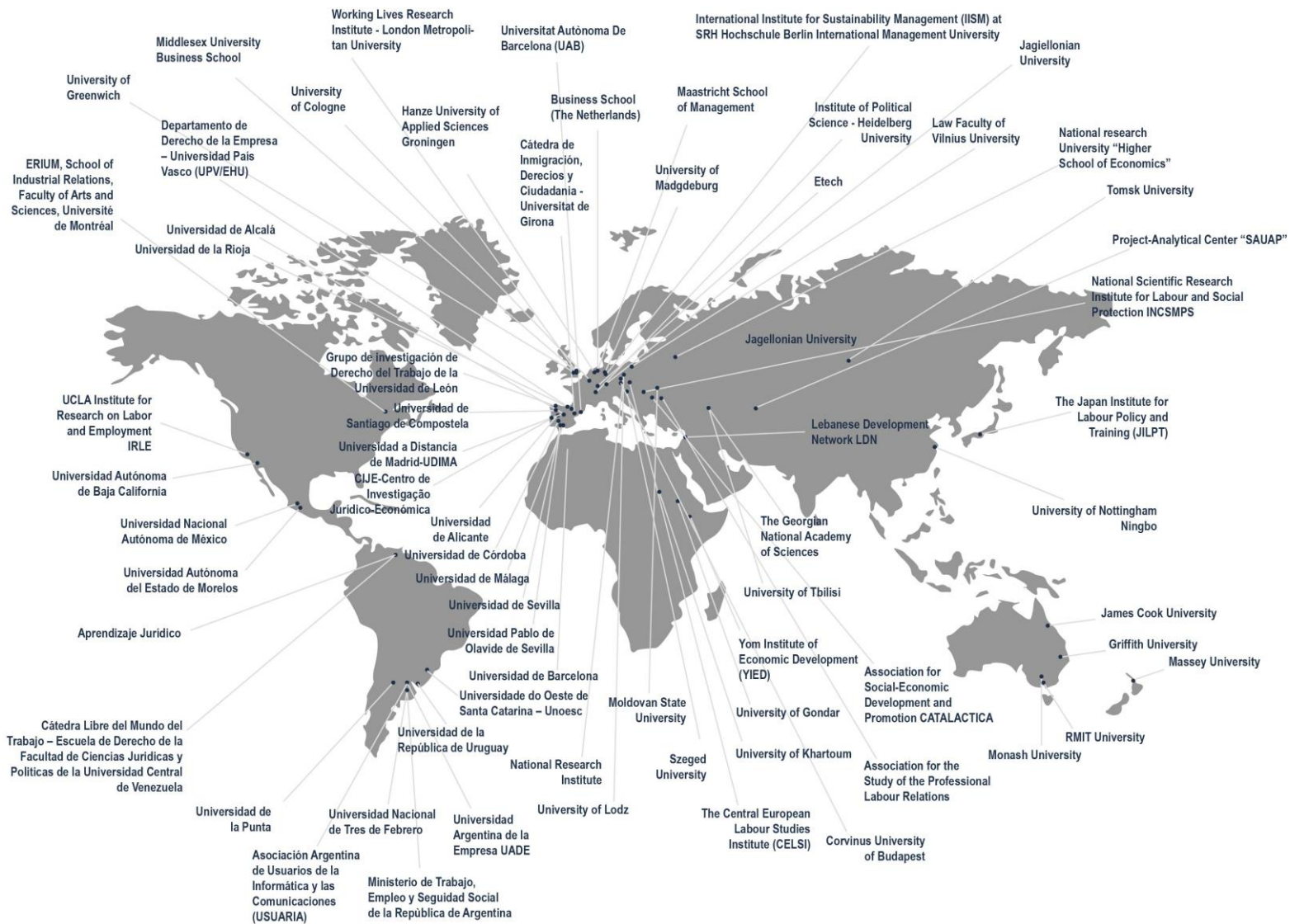
- Identifying effective intergenerational work models and investing in young people, making businesses and the environments in which they operate attractive in order to address the demographic challenge;
- Enhancing diversity, inclusivity, and a plurality of perspectives to manage the complexity and speed of change;
- Promoting the full recognition of training as a subjective right, delivering activities that are beneficial to both businesses and the workers involved, for whom increasingly non-linear career paths are anticipated;
- Adapting training models, methods, and tools to current trends, such as the hybridisation of learning models, the continuous use of advanced technologies, a greater focus on soft skills, wellbeing, and the balance between work and private life, sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and personalised learning, leveraging available

data to tailor training programmes to the learning styles and needs of the workers involved.

- Facilitating access to the opportunities offered by interprofessional funds, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises, and reduce the bureaucratic burden on those managing and implementing training activities. For example, several challenges have been reported regarding the complexity of administrative and financial reporting procedures (see paragraph 3 and 4).

In addition to the training chosen by the employer for workers, which remains fundamental, actions could be tested that also address training needs deemed important by the workers themselves. In this context, employer and trade union representatives can play an important role through collective bargaining in supporting the individual and cultural right to training and in making both employers and workers aware of the evolving nature of work.

# ADAPT International Network



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