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Breaking the Wall Between Education and Work-Life

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Great global forces of change impact education and work-life in the 21st century. These forces will impact our lives despite where we are located. As an example, up to ½ million Finns need a new education in the near future. According to the Finnish Government's (Valtioneuvosto, 2020) parliamentary reform of continuous learning, combining different skills and agile ways of updating skills are the keys for both private and public sector actors to sustain growth now and in the future. According to Sitra, the Finnish Innovation Fund, "We must dare to create new, bolder solutions between the demands of lifelong learning and the chosen education policy. The future is ahead of us in a more surprising and rapidly changing way" (Pantzar, 2020, p. 13).

In addition to higher education, work-life is also changing radically requiring new skills and competencies (Finnish National Board of Education, 2019; Työ 2040, 2017; Digitoday, 2007). In addition to digitalization and automation, this is influenced by the changed meaning of work (Työ 2040, 2017) and increasing complexity (Niemi & Kräkin, 2019). Formal educational institutions struggle to respond to this demand. Additionally, learning takes largely place outside the education system and hybrid educational models are needed to provide agile cooperation between enterprises and formal education systems. (Koponen, 2018; Työ 2040, 2017). Surely, there is a demand for future learning ecosystems, where learning is constructed from an individual learner's perspective in a real-world setting and fosters lifelong learning (Walcutt & Schatz, 2019). Such ecosystems permit new ways for learners, teams, teachers, and work-life experts to build relationships and interact (Walcutt & Schatz, 2019).

The new world of work emphasizes self-direction, interpersonal and teamwork skills. A good leader is no longer an authoritarian delegator, but a coach of interaction who nurtures employees' inner motivation and helps them find meaning in their work. Teamwork, team intelligence and team learning can respond to the increasing complexity of work-life (Fillion et al., 2015; Hiila et al., 2019). There is evidence that well-functioning teamwork leads to better results and greater job satisfaction than hierarchically managed individual work. Successful teams share a common set of agreed norms and goals. A good team is psychologically safe, its members produce on average the same amount of speech and pay attention to each other through non-verbal communication. The diversity of individuals is respected and exploited. (Duhigg, 2016.) The importance of generic skills has also grown and continues to grow in the field of work-life skills (Atsar, 2017). Soft skills include teamwork, listening, dialogical skills, empathy, self-direction, and social skills. (Azim et. al., 2010.)

Similar phenomena most probably exist in other countries too and not only in Finland. In the light of all these facts, it is evident that a new model of education is required to match work-life and education better. An education model that considers both the development of communication skills of individual students, communication within and across teams, and the more general communication between work-life and

education. Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) has created a model that embraces these facets. TAMK has developed a novel multidisciplinary degree program where communication and learning happen in a completely new learning ecosystem.

The foundation for a successful and agile operating learning ecosystem is the internalization and implementation of dialogue. So-called dialogue diamond (Isaacs, 1999) principles include listening, respecting, waiting for your turn and talking straight from the heart. Practicing these essential communicative skills is done in a team throughout studies. Practicing dialogue skills will enable team learning which is the pedagogy used in the program. Team learning is a collective capability of a team, acquired through continuous disciplined and reflective practice, which helps the team to succeed – to achieve the valuable goals that the team has set for its activities (Senge, 2006).

In the new ecosystem team members will improve dialogical and all other skills and knowledge through planning and implementing real work-life projects assigned by companies and organizations from various fields. The integration of theoretical and practical knowledge and the use of a diverse network of experts is an essential part of this new learning model. This is supported, for example, by research by Anthony and Garner (2016), who found that the best methods for learning soft skills include the use of external experts and practical, reality-based assignments that engage students.

Real-life and real-time projects are key learning opportunities also for work-life organizations. Various studies (e.g., Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) emphasize the continuously increasing significance of knowledge creation in teams also for organizations and companies. Learning plays a crucial role in the well-being and success of both staff and organization in the future, and development of professional skills are the best safeguard against change in an ever-changing and complex work-life.

To create and maintain a successful systemic ecosystem where learning happens to all participants – work-life representatives, organizations in general, students, coaches, teachers – a role of motivating and engaging system convener is essential. A systems convener or systems convening team sets up spaces for enabling new types of cross-border conversations between people who are often located on different sides of a boundary. (Wenger-Travner, 2021.) For work-life organizations it is essential that an educational actor takes the role of a system convener and facilitates the co-learning situations. TAMK's learning ecosystem operates exactly as one; it will connect companies, organizations, and universities as one.

This is a systemic learning ecosystem where learning takes place through dialogical communication between all participants, where the location of learning can be outside the formal educational institution, and where empowerment and meaningfulness of learning and creating new competencies create commitment and motivation. Characteristics of this new learning model can be applied and implemented in any degree program in any country.

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