The importance of creative problem-solving in the workplace

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Creativity in working life can be approached as a learning process. Researchers Soila Lemmetty and Kaija Collin from the University of Jyväskylä, Department of Education investigated what it means to be creative for experts in technology sector. By observing and interviewing

tens of employees, they found that creativity is an important element of employees' everyday practices.

The importance of creativity for organizations' competitiveness has long been discussed. Creativity is often connected to innovations and novel products. Creativity is also often linked to the creative arts and individual personalities. However, at the same time, there is an emerging need to see that creativity is important in every kind of job, and it should be more strongly connected to everyday problem solving.

"The starting point of our study was that anyone can act creatively at work, and it could even be a desired activity, at least for the experts," Lemmetty says, explaining the background of the research. "Creativity is not dependent only on an individual's will or the decision to be creative though. Instead, many other factors outside of the individual affect the creative process."

How to arrive at a creative solution depends on the situation and the nature of the problem at hand.

After all, it is all about learning. The problem-solver, in the other words the creative actor, is a learner in the process. The learner assesses the learning needs and methods in the situation and the quality of the solution required by the problem. However, learning does not need to be a lonely process, but colleagues and supervisors should support and help, by, for example, searching for information and sharing it.

Sometimes, especially in software development, problem-solving looks like a boring effort, but in reality, there are many kinds of processes occurring on the screen and under the surface. Actually, many of these processes relate to looking for information by discussing with colleagues, reading blogs, or testing different solutions.

"Googling was said to be one of the most important means for learning. Simultaneously, source critique, competence and experience were also called for," Lemmetty says.

However, Googling is not enough for a job to be creative, but to be creative the process should fulfil certain criteria: in a beautiful solution, for example, the code should be clear, simple and understandable by people other than experts themselves, such as by colleagues and clients.

"We cannot talk about creativity until there is an outcome. If the outcome is 'a mess' that cannot be understood, the process itself obviously cannot be creative either. Also copying the available solution was perceived as producing new problems rather than as solving them."

According to the study, it is not possible to support creativity in the technology sector just by hiring creative people, but by paying attention to the circumstances and frames of work. Essential elements of the creative learning process include the prevailing supervision and culture, experience sharing and clear aims. At the same time, however, there should be enough freedom to make decisions concerning one's own job and flexibility in scheduling and organizing work.

Why is it important to understand the nature of creative activity in the workplace? Different kinds of expert work will increase in the future, and a variety of technology will be a part of everybody's work. Therefore, it is expected that creative activity will be emphasized even more. This is why it is important to understand creative activity as an essential process of the work itself, alongside continuous learning and coping at work.

"It is fortunate that there are many kinds of people in the workplace: both inquisitive young people who are used to Googling to find solutions and more experienced employees who are familiar with sparring and

guiding others," says Lemmetty. "When these younger and more experienced practitioners are part of the same team, the possibilities for creative and successful outcomes increase."

For the article published in *Journal of Creative Behavior*, altogether 46 employees from three Finnish technology enterprises were interviewed. In addition, employees were observed in their work for nearly 150 hours. The study was conducted as part of HeRMo, a larger research project funded by the Finnish Work Environment Fund. Soila Lemmetty works as a doctoral student and examines self-directed learning in the technology sector, while Kaija Collin is a senior researcher at the University of Jyväskylä.

More information: Abraham Carmeli et al. Transformational Leadership and Creative Problem-Solving: The Mediating Role of Psychological Safety and Reflexivity, *The Journal of Creative Behavior* (2013). DOI: 10.1002/jocb.43

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