

## TOWARDS A LEARNING CULTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTIVITY: THE 21ST CENTURY GROWTH ENGINE FOR VALUE CREATION

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### Abstract

The article examines the implications of the transition from a traditional economy towards a knowledge society, in which the need for improvement and innovation is a driving force. The main concept is built on knowledge productivity as an ongoing learning process that enables the search for relevant information, the development of new competencies and capabilities, and their application to urgent matters in the day-to-day work environment. As a consequence, the work environment should be perceived as a powerful learning environment. If so, it is argued that there is a need for a well-developed corporate curriculum, a rich learning culture in which improvement and innovation can take place.

An analysis of a series of European and Asian empirical studies sheds new light on the importance of a creative learning culture and the role of leadership. For improvement, breakthroughs and innovation. The article concludes with a set of policies and design principles that facilitate a learning culture for sustainable knowledge productivity.

**Keywords:** learning culture, knowledge productivity, corporate curriculum, creativity, distributed leadership

### Introduction

For grasping the ongoing transition from an agriculture society towards an industrial society and the emerging knowledge economy (Drucker, 1993), there is a need for better understanding the specific characteristics of the learning culture and the resulting creativity that bring about these changes. Recent research sheds new light on factors that enable the transformation of available information into new capabilities that facilitate incremental improvement as well as radical innovation of operating procedures, products and services. This transformation is also called knowledge productivity (Kessels, 2001). In essence knowledge productivity is inherently a creative learning process. The cultural characteristics of the environment in which knowledge productivity takes place seem to have a strong influence, not only on its outcomes, but also on its sustainability. On the basis of new findings (De Jong, 2010; Kang, 2015; Kang, Kessels, Lee & Cho, 2014; Kessels, Verdonschot & De Jong, 2011; Verdonschot, 2009), this article not only explores the conditions of a learning culture for sustainable knowledge productivity but also proposes a set of policy requirements and design principles that may enhance creativity and innovation. In effect this text explores the domain of knowledge productivity and innovation, trying to answer the following research questions:

1. If innovation can be regarded as the outcome of a creative learning process in a social network, what are the main characteristics of the supportive learning culture?
2. Which are the relevant design principles for developing a learning culture conducive for innovation?

These questions are relevant, as in the 21-century knowledge economy, knowledge is becoming the most important asset of companies, institutions and nations. The capability of making knowledge productive will be the critical element in the process of value creation (Kessels, 2004). Financial capital, natural resources and labor will remain important assets, however, the capacity of transforming knowledge into competencies for gradual improvement and radical innovation will become the essential fuel for the growth engine of

value creation in companies, institutions and countries (Kang, 2015; Kang, Kessels, Lee & Cho, 2014).

### **Knowledge productivity of connected individuals**

The main concept in the theoretical framework is knowledge productivity: the capacity of an organisation or team to gather and interpret relevant information, to develop new capabilities on the basis of this information and applying these to the gradual improvement and radical innovation of work processes, products and services (Kessels, 2001).

The process of knowledge productivity is considered as inherently a creative learning process that includes information collecting, problem analysis, competency development and productive application of these competencies in new, unknown situations. These learning processes take place in teams or networks and can be described as social learning processes (Akçomak, 2009) and require a certain amount of social capital (Kessels & Poell, 2004). In these networks we can observe bonding, bridging and linking connections (De Jong, 2010), which can be considered as the structural dimension of social capital (Woolcock, 2001). Bonding connections closely tie together people from a very similar background, like family members and close friends and, colleagues in a stable team. Bridging connections bring together people who are from fairly similar backgrounds but are more loosely brought together, such as members across teams with shared interests. Moreover, linking connections bring together people from different backgrounds, very often from different organisations. These linking connections appear to be important for knowledge productivity and innovation.

In most instances, we find at the start of an innovation project an initiator with a strong personal interest in a specific urgent question who takes the lead, inviting colleagues to participate and starting the process of searching for relevant information, developing new competencies and experimenting with innovative practices (Verdonschot, 2009).

### **A corporate curriculum**

As the innovation processes in a corporate setting or institution are inherently learning processes, it is relevant to explore the characteristics of the learning culture that are at stake. In previous studies such a learning culture has been analysed in terms of seven learning functions of a corporate curriculum, that constitute a rich and creative landscape for learning and development in a work environment (Kessels, 2001; Stam, 2007). The following section presents a brief introduction of these seven learning functions.

#### *Learning function 1: Subject-matter expertise*

Acquiring subject-matter expertise and skill directly related to the scope of the innovation project at hand: the competencies related to acquiring subject-matter expertise traditionally have been the main objective of training and development. Yet, a highly specialised work force does not necessarily make a learning organisation that becomes knowledge productive.

#### *Learning function 2: Problem solving*

Learning to solve problems by using subject-area-specific expertise: it is important to develop competencies with which existing subject-matter knowledge is applied to solving new problems. In addition to skill at remembering and retrieving relevant knowledge, it also

