

Working Together in Local Communities:

Networking and Learning for Better Services

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Abstract

Objective: In recent years, emphasis has shifted towards cooperation between public service organisations, with the primary goal of increasing services' quality and efficiency. In order to achieve this goal, it is important to understand how different people and organisations work, as well as how they learn to work together more effectively. This paper is about a city district's experiment in building bridges between different professions, employees and organisations. This experiment invited people from different organisations within the district to take part in a day of learning, as well as volunteer to within it host workshops and discussions about day-to-day projects. After the learning day, the participants received a survey asking if they benefited from the experience and whether it created opportunities for further cooperation between people and organisations. The goal was to develop methods that encourage development and innovation through cross-professional work. **Method:** The data is from two learning days held in October 2014 and October 2015. A total of 725 participants representing various education and training level backgrounds registered for the year 2015 for the event and provided contact information. From this cohort, 415 responded, providing a 55% response rate. The research design uses descriptive analysis. **Results:** Outcome measures show that a high rate of respondents felt positively towards networking and learning from each other as a result of the experience, though 10% felt negatively. **Conclusions:** The high level of satisfaction with the initiative of creating a learning environment for organisations and individuals to build relationships with each other supports further development and innovation in the district of Breiðholt in Reykjavík city. The results support further research in similar districts elsewhere.

Keywords: Networks, Learning, Organisations, Cooperation

Introduction

Post-modern ideas about public service build upon a holistic view of organisations and employees working across organisations to increase service quality and results, as seen from the service users' perspective. Research results have shown that if organisations co-operate and effectively work together, the solutions developed are more likely to benefit citizens (Eggers & Goldsmith, 2004; Seddon, 2008).

In a changing world, governments are under constant pressure to increase their ability to solve complex societal problems. Often times, individual organisations lack sufficient resources and abilities by themselves, and so they need to co-operate with other organisations to reach solutions. When for example, child care cases involve the whole family, organisations must create partnerships where teachers, social workers and health and support workers work together to find durable solutions. Collaboration between different organisations can also pose challenges for the individuals on the teams; these challenges, and especially the emotional problems that can arise, are often underestimated. To overcome these challenges, it can be useful to look at methods that encourage learning how individuals can work together more effectively in, for example, multi-professional teamwork in integrated children's services (Anning, Cottrell, Frost, Green, & Robinson, 2010; Fullan, 2005; Bason, 2010). Lack of integration between the solution and the current system can hinder service provision. In response, solutions that do not involve changing or integrating systems are often applied. This often results in specialised solutions; however, it does not help the parties involved more effectively work together, and it often leads to departments or agents within the same organisation pulling in opposite directions. In such cases, mistakes can go unnoticed, and service users can feel alienation towards 'the system', as it is not working as a whole. This can make them feel that, as service users and citizens, they have no part in the solution, as the solution developed by the organisations might not even suit them in the first place. In the literature addressing these challenges, this problem is sometimes compared to silos that exist almost independently of each other, creating problems for ordinary people who need services from more than one silo at a time (Bason, 2010).

This paper's main discussion revolves around how, through learning methods and cooperation, we can create better relationships between individuals working across organisations within the same city district. This could result in networking, where people form bonds with formal and informal ties, communicating both because of common projects and for various forms of support. Change that builds upon learning refers to the idea of people working together to produce better solution and innovation (Mintzberg, 1989; Fullan, 2006).

The context

This paper reports the findings from a study about an annual learning day that aims to enable professionals to share information and create a network. This study questions how the participants experienced this initiative and whether it enhanced learning and cooperation. The project is called ‘Breiðholtsbylgjan’—which translates from Icelandic to ‘the wave of Breiðholt city district’—and it is part of a community work project aimed at creating change and social condition renewal. There are three neighbourhoods within the district called Seljahverfi, Lower Breiðholt and Upper Breiðholt, which have a combined population of 21,257 citizens (Hagstofa Íslands, 2016).

The project is the responsibility of a service centre that has been part of five Reykjavík service districts since 2005 (Jóhannesson & Þorvaldssdóttir, 2010). The service centre is based on the one-stop shop model, which has been developed over the past decade in both Nordic and other European countries (Askim, Fimreite, Moseley, & Pedersen, 2011). Research on services’ decentralisation in districts within municipalities has previously focused on organisations’ role within geographically defined spaces, as well as how size, cooperation and district councils successfully function and serve the public (Hansen, Klausen, & Winsvold, 2013; Bäck, Gjelstrup, Helgesen, & Klausen, 2005; Brunet-Jailly, 2005). This paper intends to add to the discussion on how we can enhance cooperation within city districts and neighbourhoods for the citizens’ benefit. This project’s background and context is a developmental project concerning how well Reykjavík services work together in the citizens’ best interests. In order to stimulate development and tackle various challenges related to economic, social, health and educational issues, the city council decided to launch a pilot project in the Breiðholt district. In some of the district’s neighbourhoods, over a quarter of the residents have a multi-ethnic background, with 1,200 residents migrating into and out of the district. Working with this diversity and creating better understanding in the community regarding issues like health, education and social inclusion should lead to better results for individuals, families and the community. The main aims have been to create better services for citizens based on neighbourhood community and work. The goal has been to use available resources and to aid various organisations and individuals in working together more effectively to achieve these aims (Jóhannessdóttir, 2012; Jónatansdóttir, 2013; Reykjavík City, 2011). In order to achieve these aims, a change was made in the management: a local director was hired to supervise all functions in the district. This director was responsible for the service centre’s cross-professional functions, which collaborate with, for example, schools and kindergartens by providing support and services for children and their

parents (Arnardóttir, 2012). Besides social services, kindergarten and elementary schools, the organisations affected include youth clubs, environmental services, sports, cultural centres and services for disabled people. This initiative began with a yearlong course in March 2012, where 40 district leaders and managers took part with assistance from the University of Iceland (Kristjánsson, Ólafsson, & Stefánsdóttir, 2013). The course was based on a theory of systems leadership and the learning community, which considers change through learning to be important when creating change and innovation (Fullan, 2005; Seddon, 2008). The course's focus was the child and how different systems can more effectively work together in the interests of the child, as well as the family and the community. The mayor and Reykjavík's main officials formed a steering group to oversee this part of the working plan. This project only took place in the Breiðholt district, partly because of the city district's complexity and partly due to an election promise to focus on that district. The city council plans on developing other city districts based partly on this project's outcome (Reykjavík City, 2012). The project was evaluated by the University of Iceland's Institute of Public Service in January 2015. The main findings showed positive development and outcomes, partly based on better system cooperation. This resulted in clients needing less financial support, rising educational levels, health improvements and media research demonstrating a more positive image of the district and the neighbourhoods within it. This has resulted in citizens' increased service satisfaction (Reynisson, 2015).

Cooperation

Using learning and reflective methods to develop services has been shown to increase service quality. A working environment that supports employees working together empowers those employees; this creates an innovative learning culture that, through dialogue, leads to processes that empower clients and citizens (Deming, 2000; Senge, 1990; Hutchinson, 2014). This can happen through both formal and informal communication. The use of teams meets these requirements within organisational setting in cases where both sharing information and cooperating between various workplaces and across various institutions becomes more of a challenge. Enabling people to connect in different and even informal ways can solve these challenges and create a culture of networking (Cross & Parker, 2004; Mintzberg, 1989).

Recent discussions about systems thinking from Peter Senge and Otto B. Scharmer have brought forward critical views on failures in solutions needed in the economic, public and environmental fields. School, social and health systems working in separate silos are not producing solutions that sufficiently benefit the citizens. Lack of cooperation at all levels does not bring specialised knowledge into a cross-professional setting and does not reflect the holistic context of peoples'

lives. To answer this criticism, methods for cooperation and reflection through debate and dialogue have been developed, allowing organisations to reach deeper understandings of the problem, as well as create solutions that involve more teamwork and co-creation (Scharmer, 2009; Senge, 1990).

Enabling people to share information and connect for further cooperation also creates better conditions as social capital increases. Social capital has been defined in three forms, namely, bridging, bonding and linking. Bonding social capital is based on enduring, multifaceted relationships between similar people, such as friends and family. Bridging social capital is formed from the connection between people who have less in common but who may have overlapping interests, such as neighbours, colleagues or different groups within a community. Linking capital is derived from links between people or organisations that go beyond peer boundaries, enabling people to exert influence and to reach resources that are beyond their normal circles (Putnam, 2000; Kristinsson, 2001; Henderson & Thomas, 2013; Gilchrist & Taylor, 2016). However, there are indications that measuring social capital and assessing whether intervention has any affect is difficult to accomplish without simultaneously affecting the subject. This is because doing so and introducing such outcomes will most likely be discussed by people working in the community, therefore becoming part of the community's development (Macgillivray & Walker, 2000).

The event

The following data are the results from the surveys following an annual learning day. All city, state and third-sector staff members involved in providing services for children and families were invited to an annual learning day. The participants were asked if they would like to share anything with the other professionals by providing a workshop showcasing their knowledge or experience. Approximately 40 participants volunteered annually as workshop leaders. The day began when around 800 participants came together in the local sports hall for a motivational speech aimed at creating a common group spirit around the idea of working together in the district. Following this, participants chose two workshops to attend and participate in. The day concluded with a banquet, a picture show and the opportunity for participants to reflect together. The research provides insight into how these participants valued this learning experience, as well as guidance for further development in cross-professional or cross-sectional work in local-level cooperation in working in the Breidholt district citizens' best interests.

Method

A total of 725 attendees participated in the 2014 survey, all of whom had registered with contact information. From this cohort, we received 415 responses, or a 55% response rate. Regarding their educational background, 67% had completed university degrees, 12% had completed secondary school, 4% had completed vocational training, 11% had completed elementary school and 6% had completed other education.

The participants included staff members from schools, kindergarten, environmental services, health care, service centres, gymnasiums, sports clubs, mental health centres, fabrication labs (innovation centres), cultural and social centres, home care and after-school homes. This means that the participants were a mix of people with various backgrounds in working on various tasks. They taught, supported, provided care and worked in services concerning culture, sports and social work.

The research design was based on descriptive analysis.

Outcome measures show that a high rate of respondents felt positively towards networking and learning from each other, though over 10% felt negatively.

The learning day was developed over three years. After each yearly event, the participant survey is evaluated by the participating institutions' managers, and the method has been developed and improved accordingly.

Participants received an electronic questionnaire via email in 2013 and 2014. This was followed up by regular reminders to respondents to answer, which resulted in a 55% response rate. Besides asking for closed answers, we also included open questions for further comments. For both years, the main questions were: 'Is it important to provide a learning day like Breiðholtsbylgjan?' and 'How can we use this event to support cross-professional work for and with children?'

Results

When asked about participants' satisfaction with the event, 86% replied that they were very or rather happy. Few respondents (2%) claimed that they were not satisfied. There was not a significant change in this regard compared to the previous year's event in 2013. However, there were indications that there was starting to be a slight shift towards less satisfaction with the event. In 2013, those who were very satisfied equalled 40%, but this figure dropped to 33.5% in the following year. However, general satisfaction increased from 47% to 51%. There were increasing

expectations for small improvements, as participants commented on in the survey's open questions. Some felt there was 'not enough commitment because the event was on a Friday, [so there was] too little focus because of the upcoming weekend'. For the aim of getting to know other people, the obvious possibility to 'network with their names on a card and enable people to mingle more' would aid in introducing people more effectively. Various comments about the main gathering's opening speaker demonstrated different needs. Some wanted more serious team-building input, while others wanted a more humorous approach to set the tone. There was another indication of a negative shift, with very satisfied participants decreasing in number while those that were only satisfied grew. There was little change in other answers, so the observable shift was from 'very satisfied' to 'satisfied'. While hardly anyone was very unsatisfied, about 10% were neutral and felt unsure about whether the event fulfilled their expectations.

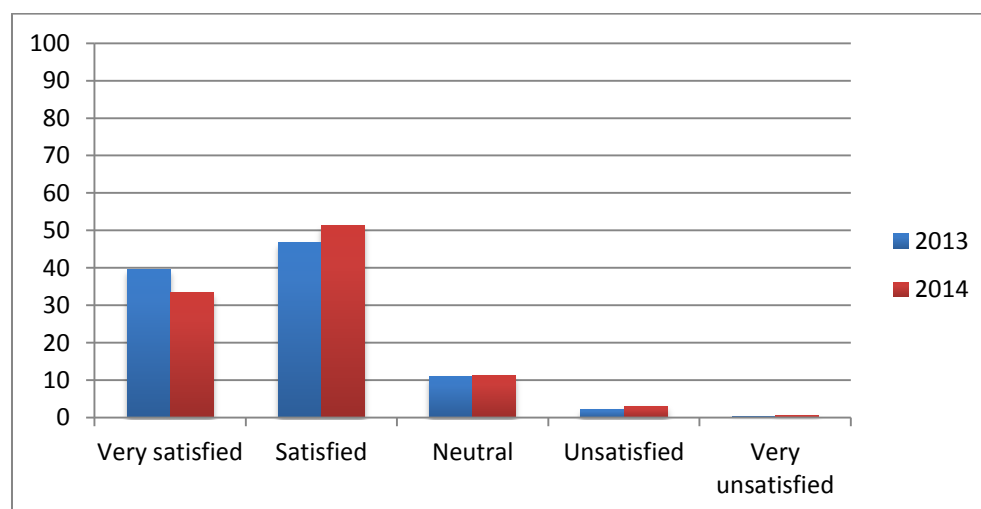


Figure 1. How satisfied were you with the event (Breiðholtsbylgjan)?

As a learning experience, in 2014, 9% claimed that they did not learn anything new, but over 75% reported that they did, while 15% were unsure. Even though a large number reported that they liked the event and felt it to be a positive learning experience, only 45% thought that they could use what they learned in their jobs, and the same number was unsure. About 11% did not think that they could apply their learning experience to their job. This is a positive change between the years, with 10% more participants thinking that they could use what they learned from the last event.

When breaking down the events, 5% of the participants did not think that the workshops' subjects were important, but 70% thought that they were very important, while 25% thought that they were rather important. Participants commented on an overuse of structural methods when running workshops. As one respondent put it, 'More work in workshops, too much PowerPoint'. These and other comments on the workshops will help to develop them in cooperation with the participants. In a follow-up question concerning just the workshops, workshop providers who were also colleagues felt satisfied with providing the workshops, but they felt that they were missing out on the learning experience as a common participant.

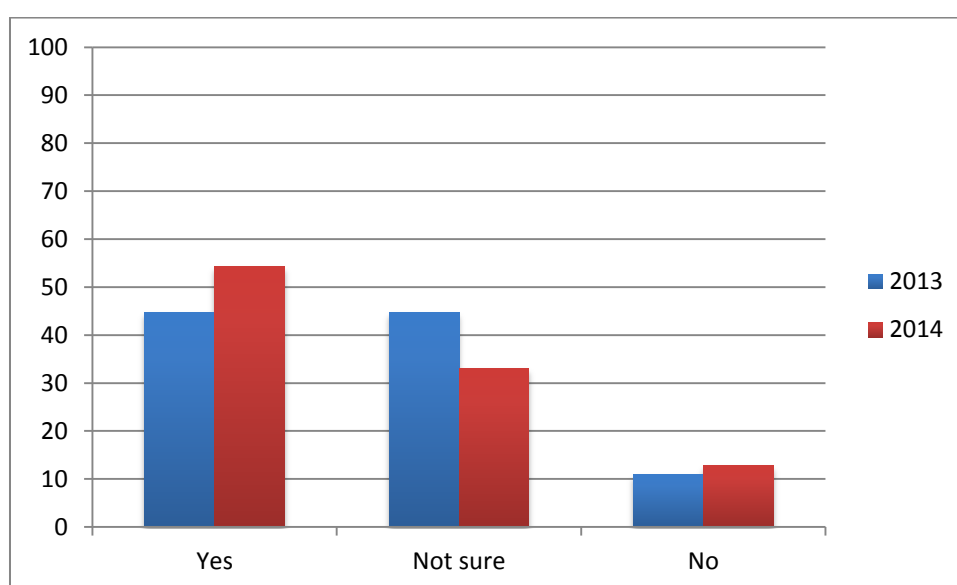


Figure 2. Will you use what you learned in your job?

Learning skills and developing new methods in work was not the event's only aim; learning more about oneself was also important. The need for personal growth was stated in comments about the day: 'It would be good if the workshops would be more about supporting employees as a person in cooperation'. This has been addressed in workshops provided by service centre experts, and these workshops have been popular and fully booked each time. The need for personal support is evident.

When asked how important participants felt it was to meet people from various workplaces in the district, 35% felt that it mattered a lot, while 50% felt that it mattered and 15% felt that it did not matter. This means that, if the statements 'matter a lot' and 'matter' are put together, 85% felt

that it matters that they know where to get knowledge and help within the neighbourhood. This was a shift from 2013 to 2014, with 9% fewer respondents feeling that this mattered a lot and five percent more feeling think it mattered.

One of the learning day's aims was creating a supportive environment where people with various skills and knowledge could share knowledge and support. When asked about how important participants felt this to be, 62% considered it very important, 31% considered it rather important and 7% did not consider it important. On the whole, these answers showed a slight decline in learning from and networking with others through a day like this. However, the main outcome shows that a large majority of participants reported that receiving and sharing knowledge is valuable through the way that it creates positive network settings.

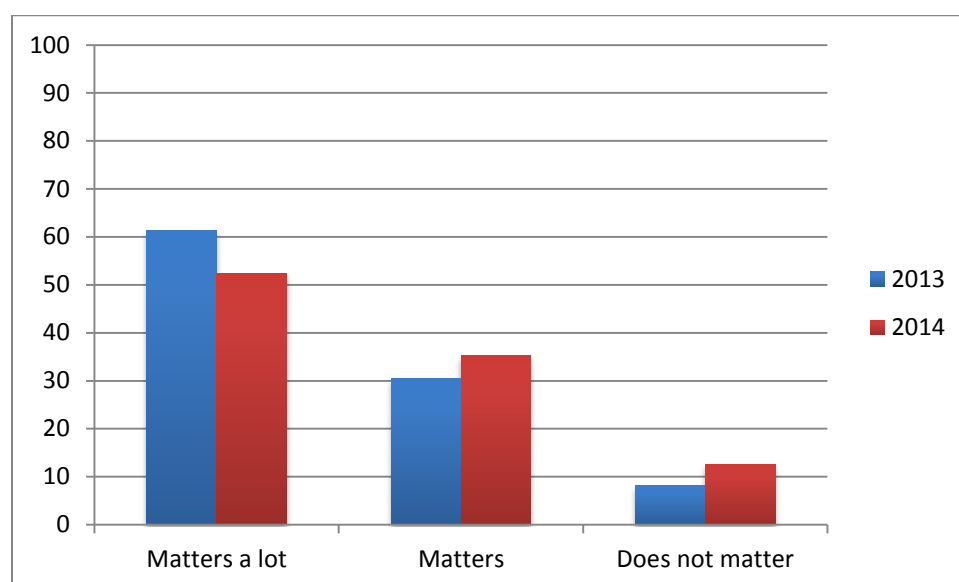


Figure 3. I know where to get knowledge and help within the neighbourhood better than before. If so, how much does this matter?

Part of the experience was aimed towards creating a feeling that everyone was working together as a group in the city district, as well as creating the sense that the neighbourhoods as a whole were coming together. Over half of the participants (60%) felt that this was very important, while 32% felt it to be rather important and 8% felt that it was not important. The team-building effect was quite high, but it showed some decline across the years. The emphasis on providing workshops seemed to take time from the opportunity for connecting and networking; as one

comment indicated: 'People cannot get to know each other because the workshops were so tightly planned with too little free time in between'. Individual workplaces and professional groups demonstrated different views. In 2014, 10% of participants working in kindergarten reported being more satisfied than the average findings of 86%, so 96% of those working in kindergarten were satisfied. Regarding educational levels, about 25% of those working in kindergarten had professional training from a university, while 75% did not. Including those that received formal professional training from vocational and secondary schools raised the average of professionally trained workers to 34%. The learning day concept developed through inviting more participants from more sectors, as was evident in participants' responses asking the planners to 'invite more government and third-sector employees'. There has also been discussion on how it might be possible to invite service users, parents and others who could be considered co-creators of the service. As one response phrased it, 'Invite users to tell about their experience from the service and tell what can be improved and what is good in the service'.

When asked about whether there should be another day for the whole district, a clear majority (80%) desired to continue this annual experience. The general findings demonstrated an interest in developing the experience. As one participant stated: 'Great opportunity for learning, I [just] wish there would be a longer time and more workshops so we can experience more'.

Reflecting on these results inspired managers from various organisations in the district to discuss whether this form supported enough policies and the tasks at hand. An internet survey of managers resulted in findings that differed from the general survey of participants in general. There was less enthusiasm for this type of a learning day, as well as more expressed need for a practical approach on inward subjects concerning only policy and practical tasks, such as school curriculum. This was most apparent in schools, with about 65% of school managers wanting the event to be held every other year, a view shared by only 25% of other services' managers.

Discussion

The number of respondents was above the expected ratio, giving the dataset increased validity compared to 2013, which had lower response rate. While respondents showed interest in continuing this event, there were indications that the need for working together is experiencing a slight decline, which needs to be looked into more thoroughly. Creating better understanding of such an opportunity's value would increase participation, making the learning more effective. Organisations working within the district use up to seven days every year to plan, discuss and create learning opportunities, so this half-day is valuable time for all stakeholders. Creating this

forum opened up discussions about this type of work, resulting in participants beginning to better evaluate what value this has for them. If the aim is for the participants to work together more effectively for the citizens—and in this case, for the children—then there should be room for improvement.

When looking at background variables on education, as well as how such variables relate to the answers, there were indications of a relationship between educational background and the need for more cooperation. In other words, there is a need to work with employees that have little or no formal education on how collaborative work can create learning opportunities. When breaking down the answers among groups and looking at background variables, almost all participants from the 12 kindergartens (95%) were satisfied with the event and showed interest in continuing this learning event. This correlates with lower educational background, where 25% of this group had finished university degrees compared to the whole group's 67%. This also indicates that participants with more education were less satisfied and felt less need for this type of learning experience. This could also indicate that they could take on more responsibility in providing workshops and leading knowledge-sharing within the district.

The survey's answers give evidence that opportunities to create bridging social capital are welcomed. The value of this social capital build-up is evident in multiple projects creating more education, better health and less need for support for daily needs. Social capital's value within and between professionals across various departments can be detected. This has not been discussed at any length in this paper, but this can be followed up more thoroughly in a previously cited evaluation, the findings of which reveal positive results supporting citizen empowerment through system integration (Reynisson, 2015).

These results only scratch the surface of social networks' hidden effects on organisations. The question remains regarding how people connect un-formally across, for example, kinship, former working relationships and through volunteer work and social activities. More work must be done in order to understand how better results can be derived from these networks. Performing a social network analysis allows for the possibility to find results that can help to increase both the quality and effectiveness of different departments and workplaces in the city, government and third sector by cooperating more effectively for children and families (Cross, Singer, Colella, Thomas, & Silverstone, 2010).

The overall community project that this event is a part of has benefited from this open method, which has also involved third sector partners and voluntary agents like sports clubs. Sharing

visions, ideologies, methods and projects has created a better basis for community work for change that could lead to innovation and development. Bringing together teachers, sports club trainers and health and social workers provides new possibilities to work on, for example, health issues. One such project has been a preventive community health plan, in which everyone is invited to participate. Based on four pillars—nutrition, mental health, movement and wellbeing—each and every stakeholder makes its own plan that comes together into a community-based plan for the district (Gísladóttir & Ólafson, 2014).

The motivation and understanding for cooperating on such a scale has been inspired by this event's learning experience, making such community work-based efforts more realistic. Connecting people through shared knowledge, communication and enjoying time together is likely to strengthen relations and inspire more trust between people and organisations. In turn, this event is likely to positively affect social capital. Measuring and discussing the level of participation and interest in meeting up on a day like this can also have the positive effect of bringing the idea of community and cooperation into focus, thus stimulating further development for a stronger network in the city district.

The diversity of different views creates a better understanding of different needs within the district. Alongside people's different backgrounds, multicultural aspects need to be addressed, as does the changing population. A greater learning culture emphasis could help services and educational agents to better understand this when cross-professionally analysing the needs of individuals and the community as a whole based on differing cultures and social status.

Conclusion

The high level of satisfaction with the initiative of creating an environment for professionals to learn and to build relationships with each other supports further development of the concept of learning together within networks. There is a gap between the experience of participants as a whole and the views of leadership. This must be discussed and developed for better harmony between policy and employee needs. This event indicates that more can be expected from building a network defined by a city district. By using better and more efficient methods like social network analysis, leaders and managers from various organisations and service providers can expect even better results through more effective collaboration.

There are indications that this event needs to more effectively fulfil the needs of more educated participants during this learning opportunity. Currently, those with less education or training benefit the most from this form of learning. Further research is recommended, including a

follow-up survey with human resource managers. The data and collected comments indicate that attitudes towards cooperation need to be discussed further, along with why learning together in a networking forum has value and what this means for everyone. A large majority felt that notion this has great value and should be developed further. According to the overall results, as well as findings from other research, there is room for improvement in cross-professional work, as well as potential for further gains by applying systems thinking in working and learning together.

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