Supportive systems for continuous and online professional development

Abstract

Due to the development of social media and online environments, the content and form of educational systems is changing. At the same time, demands on the individual professional to ensure that he or she is continually updated and employable are increasing. This places demands on the co-workers’ supply of competence being adapted to today’s ways of organising business operations. Traditional competence development and e-learning whereby all participants receive the same offering through training is not suitable to match such needs.

The SupSys project is developing an alternative to established education and forms of training in the shape of a supportive system. The challenge is how to develop a Support System based on contemporary media that continuously strengthens the individual’s qualifications. Supportive systems online will then be different from educational and training systems in that they assist adults with pathways for improving their knowledge and competence, including both professionals and vulnerable groups across borders and nations. SupSys is intended to contribute towards solving companies’ and organisations’ need for a flexible supply of competence as well as the individual professional’s need for support.

The purpose of the SupSys project is to develop, on a European basis, a system for streamlining companies and businesses that procedurally support professional groups’ continuous qualification development where qualification represents a combination of knowledge, skill, and competence.
Background – the problem

SupSys is intended to contribute towards solving companies’ and organisations’ need for a flexible supply of competence as well as the individual professional’s need for support.

Stiff competition and globalisation are making flexible adaptability and customer-adapted offerings important factors in the competitiveness of companies and organisations. This places demands on the co-workers’ supply of competence being adapted to today’s ways of organising business operations. Traditional competence development, whereby all participants receive the same offering through training, is unable to match such a trend in all respects.

At the same time, demands on the individual professional to be constantly updated and employable are increasing. Previously, organisations/employers and society bore this responsibility, creating clear guidelines for the professional’s knowledge and competence development. This has changed and the individual is now becoming increasingly responsible for his or her own competence development. This trend has been described using the “individualisation thesis” which entails people’s life space expanding to include more as well as freer options. In consequence, the individual is responsible for his or her choices and thus his or her own qualification development. This particularly applies to situations where organisations, employees, and society were responsible, previously supplying guidance and road maps for professional knowledge and skill. This change brings the need for continuous and constantly existing support for the individual’ personal development, which assists the individual in navigating through his or her learning, work, and life environment. This does not happen today and that is a problem.

Purpose of SupSys

The purpose of the SupSys project is to develop, on a European basis, a system for streamlining companies and businesses that procedurally support professional groups’ continuous qualification development where qualification represents a combination of knowledge, skill, and competence.

Contribution towards a solution

SupSys will be the development of modern online environments where the qualifications of professionals are continuously being developed qualitatively, enduringly and with progression. This will guide and facilitate professionally active individuals who are consciously aspiring to enhance their competence and skills through informal ways of working. This will lead to increased operational effectiveness which will in turn lead to increased competitiveness.

In the SupSys project, we are developing, through method development, an alternative to established forms of education and training in the shape of an online Supportive System which continuously supports professionals in their development. Even today, new forms of social media and online environments constitute, to a certain extent, such supportive systems for the development of individuals – but could be developed using institutional input.
There is rapid development within online-based informal environments, such as Online communities but now also called Personal Learning Networks (PLN). Here, learning and individual development take place through a range of different forms; e.g. stories, self-reflection, and various forms of mutual exchange between participants. Examples of such online environments include communities like LinkedIn, blogs, and microblogs like Twitter as well as social media like Facebook. As a consequence of increasing participation on the net, a need for coordination has been created for the individual user. The solution is called the Personal Learning Environment (PLE) and this is a grouping together of the individual’s various sources of information. The latter is pointed out, for instance, in the Horizon report as one of 4 important future development trends on the net. In parallel with the development of online environments, there is also active development online in fields such as free educational resources and free courses.

The European Commission points out that “an increasing share of learning occurs at the workplace, in non-formal contexts and in leisure time - often through new ICT-based learning tools and methods” (European Commission 2008). In practice, consequently, modern media development thus partly constitutes a supportive system which continuously supports the individual participant’s improvement.

What does a supportive system entail?

A supportive system entails the structured and planned development of qualifications online in accordance with an EQF (or similar framework) schedule.

The interwoven, individual development processes that take place in an online environment have a special characteristic which constitutes an essential pre-requisite in the development of a supportive system. Four differences between formal educational systems and supportive systems, which must be taken into account when designing a system, can be distinguished. From a traditional educational situation to a supportive system, these 4 are: 1) From pre-produced to user-generated content, 2) from individual subject motives to joint qualification interests, 3) from limited duration to continuous and enduring activity, 4) from subjects and thematic areas to a broad perspective on the participants’ skills.

These 4 differences mean that a content subject cannot be taken as a departure point – a supportive system is neither a course nor an education. It requires a broader perspective and is based, in that case, on the participants’ shared interest instead of a specific subject. It will then be more suited to purpose to use professional qualification for the development of individuals. Through the European Qualification Framework, the EU has prescribed a definition: Qualification entails, on 8 different levels:

- **Results of learning** expressed in knowledge, skill, and competence,
- **Knowledge** which is the result of assimilating information through learning,
- **Skill** is the ability to apply knowledge in order to carry out tasks and solve problems,
- **Competence** is the exhibited capacity to use knowledge and skill in occupationally-related development. Expressed in terms of responsibility and independence.
A supportive system entails, then, structured and planned qualification development in accordance with an “EQF schedule” where the participants’ qualification is consciously reconciled and enhanced. The system adds its principle to existing forms of online environments, but which are being further developed and supported methodically and systematically.

Process support and progression constitute the other principal part of a supportive system and have the purpose of bringing together the individuals’ PLEs within the shared OLC/PLN. The issue of supervision is key. In many social media and similar online environments, there is no direct supervision – examples of such media being Twitter and Facebook. Possibly, there is some control of activities, but this is not supported by an expert or an outsider.

The purpose of SupSys is to methodically and systemically support and advance the progressive development of the participants’ qualifications. In this case, supervisors are required but the difficulty of supervising such a learning process is apparent. Supporting the process is an advanced task for one person - a process facilitator – but there is also need for a subject expert – professional expert – to support the development of the participants’ knowledge, competencies, and skills. This leadership duo forms an important component of the development and implementation of a system.

A supportive system can consist of a combination of different units – exactly which ones and how these will work together will be developed within the project. Personal Learning Environments constitute the foundation, however. They constitute the source of the system. Through his or her work, through monitoring the wider world and contacts, the individual generates input for the system. This input is passed on to a shared platform where it creates a process in the form of a stream of messages and events which are processed in a shared network. Input becomes the object of processing and provides feedback to the individual participant – it is a circular course of events that is described in the following figure:

Figure: Basics of a circular method
In order for this to bring progression and reconciliation with an EQF schedule, a methodology is required, as well as planning, structure, and management – which will be developed within the project. The method is named in accordance with the circular course of events as a **Circular Method - CM**. To develop this method knowledge could be gained from research on Online learning communities, Computer-supported collaborative learning and similar as well as the Japanese corporate study groups *Sho shudan katsudo*, the Swedish adult education study circle methodology and from European Learning Circles.

The process of the circular method generally consists of a continuous interplay between the participant’s user generated input and episodes of sequences of informal learning and formal qualification development. The combination of input and informal/formal episodes in sequences pre-requires and places demands concerning structure, support, and management – exactly how and in which way will be developed within the project.

**Target group of a supportive system**

Co-workers with shared qualification interests have the greatest possibilities of developing progressive and continuous development within a supportive online system. Potential target groups include:

- **Co-workers in different SMEs with similar spheres of activity.**
  Examples: Financial managers in various SMEs, production managers in various SMEs
- **Co-workers in major businesses, companies, or groups with similar spheres of activity**
  Examples: Store managers in a major retail chain, HR staff in various municipalities.
- **Individual professionals linked to the same industry without being geographically or mutually in competition**
  Examples: Shoemakers, accountants, dentists, and farmers
- **Members of trade associations, unions, and professional and industrial organisations.**
  Examples: Teachers, consultants, therapists; Occupational groups in union organisations

**Project format**

Within the project, 4 phases are planned: The first phase relates to analyses of the prerequisites of supportive systems and the development of supportive data for a methodology in different WPs. The second phase entails the different development sections being brought together in one uniform methodology according to the principles of a circular methodology. The third phase entails supportive systems being implemented at a number of SMEs. In the fourth phase, conclusions and recommendations are brought together in a framework that constitutes supportive data, method books and guidelines for the development and implementation of supportive systems.

The various WPs are presented in the figure below. The project contains four obligatory WPs for the management, dissemination, and exploitation/utilization of results - WPs 1, 8, 9, and 10. By means of WPs 3 to 7, we intend to analyse and develop the circular method, while
WP 2 is the SMEs participation in the project in the form of reference groups and a number of pilots.

- **WP 1 Management**
  To organize and manage the project

- **WP 2 User involvement - Pilots**
  To be involved in development work as a reference group and methodology evaluators as pilots.

- **WP 3 The Input - PLE - Development**
  To research and develop methodology and materials for the implementation of PLE – Personal learning environments.

- **WP 4 The Process - PLN – Development**
  To explore and develop methodology and materials for the implementation of PLN – Personal learning networks - in combination with the PLEs and the support processes and facilitation needed for a continuing learning and development process.

- **WP 5 The Qualification assessment - Development**
  To explore and adapt contemporary methods to achieve a progressive continuing assessment and development review of participants' skill development.

- **WP 6 Software adaption - Development**
  To compile and evaluate relevant ICT systems and programs and provide horizons in the technology development.

- **WP 7 Integration**
  To bring together the various elements into a methodological schedule adapted to the different development phases of the participants development.

- **WP 8 Dissemination**
  To design and implement the dissemination strategy in order to publicize the project and the result.

- **WP 9 Exploitation and methodological framework**
  To create the ground for the project sustainability by producing a methodological framework for future exercise and implementation.

- **WP 10 Project Quality and Evaluation**
To assure the quality in the development execution and management of the project, internally evaluate and foreseeing potential risks.

References
