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Chapter 6

CASES AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TIME4HELP PROJECT IN FINLAND

Kaija Villman and Mervi Rajahonka

ABSTRACT

The chapter describes a model solution for supporting mature women, developed as part of the Finnish Time4Help project. The solution includes training programmes for mature women supporting their careers and networking. The model is built on a new flipped training and coaching programme approach where, first, women were asked to gather a group of peers who were interested in developing their enterprises or working skills and who had similar needs and interests to them. After that, a programme was built matching the needs of this group of women. This model resembles the study circle approach particularly popular in the Scandinavian countries. Therefore, the authors build on the research literature on study circles, and study how tailored programmes help mature women to develop their careers and reach a work–life balance. The empirical part of the research builds on interviews and observations with 25 women in 5 groups and their facilitators participating in Time4Help training programmes in Finland in 2019–2021.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Time4Help Finland project supports the career development, leadership, entrepreneurship and wellbeing of women aged 45–65 in rapidly changing working life by developing, testing and implementing new solutions for

women's career paths and skills promotion. The training and coaching programmes organised in the project included service business coaching packages for mature women for updating and developing their skills and increasing their wellbeing at work. The training programmes were built matching the needs of the groups of women. The tailored programmes resembled study circles. In this chapter, our research question is: how can tailored training programmes support mature women's careers, lifelong learning and networking and help them to reach an appropriate work-life balance?

2. STUDY CIRCLES AS AN EXAMPLE OF TAILORED TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Study circles are described as small groups of people who meet to discuss a particular topic. The topics discussed can be almost anything, but the difference from other groups is that a study circle focusses on a topic of common interest, not just socialising between the members. Originally, they emerged in Sweden in the late nineteenth century, linked to the change in society from agrarian to industrial. In the middle of the century, a law on compulsory education was introduced in Sweden, raising the question about how to educate illiterate adults ([Velichko, 2004](#)). An important aim of study circles in Sweden was to increase citizens' solidarity and political participation. However, the topics studied were not limited to political and social issues, but regular school topics and literature could be studied, too ([Larsson & Nordvall, 2010](#)).

Although the idea of study circles spread all over the world, they are still particularly popular in Sweden, where they are the most common form of adult education, as almost two million people attend circles every year. People older than 50 years particularly attend study circles, because other education types concentrate on younger people ([Larsson & Nordvall, 2010](#)). Study circles are an especially suitable learning method for adults, because in them the learners are their own knowledge managers, deciding what and how to learn. Study circles are an important method of 'learning by sharing'. People learn to discuss, show consideration for others and share responsibility ([Bjerkaker, 2014](#)).

Typically, there is no teacher in a study circle: members sitting in a circle are equals sharing their knowledge and skills and learning together from each other. However, there can be a facilitator guiding the discussions and stimulating the group by offering reading material, for example ([Bjerkaker, 2014](#)). The circles can meet for weeks or months. There are no exams and no grades are

given. Study circles always have a beginning and an end, and there are time-lines and deadlines for systematising the work (Riel, 2014; Velichko, 2004).

Usually, study circles are said to be at their best if the group is rather small, but not too small. Often the optimum size is mentioned to be around 5–15 persons – the size balancing diversity and a feeling of togetherness (Bjerkaker, 2014; Larsson & Nordvall, 2010; Riel, 2014; Velichko, 2004). The group usually decides the objectives, content, materials, modes of cooperation, etc., together. At the beginning, there should be activities for building trust, guaranteeing that every member contributes (Riel, 2014). Besides constructive discussions of the whole study circle, the methods used can be individual tasks or group work in pairs or bigger groups (Velichko, 2004). It is valuable to provide flexibility in the work during the process, so that members can change plans if needed (Bjerkaker, 2014; Campbell et al., 2001).

Even if the circle has a facilitator, they are not a leader of the process, but rather a trust-builder and follower and sharer of members' contributions. Often the hardest part to understand for the members is the cultural change towards collective leadership; each member has the responsibility to contribute and be a leader. Digital tools can make this kind of distributed work easier, but the interaction patterns and social norms are more difficult to change (Riel, 2014).

There are certain pitfalls of study circles. Bjerkaker (2014) refers to Bystrom (1976) and mentions that study circles can develop into coffee parties, school classes or therapeutic groups, where the purpose of the circle is distorted. Coffee groups do not have any objectives, school classes have a teacher and pupils and therapeutic groups focus on members' mental and social problems.

There are other concepts very close to the concept of study circles, including learning communities and communities of practice. There are similarities, and these concepts are also often used interchangeably. All these concepts build on a common assumption that everybody has valuable knowledge and experience they can share with others. However, if you want to draw a difference between the concepts, study circles are for sharing knowledge, for open dialogue and deep reflection to develop solutions, whereas in learning communities and communities of practice people make a deeper commitment to support each other. Today, study circles can also be organised online (Riel, 2014), and can be used as a method in massive open online courses (Ronkowitz, 2018).

Next, we discuss the empirical findings building on interviews with 25 women and their facilitators participating in Time4Help training and coaching programmes in the South Savo region in Finland in 2019–2021.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The Time4Help Finland project held a continuous open call for groups of women who wanted to develop themselves. Women were asked to gather a group of like-minded peers who were interested in developing their careers and had similar needs and interests. After that, a training programme was built matching the needs of each group of women. Peer discussions on wellbeing and the development of women's careers were popular themes, as well as objectives to co-design services and support networking. Up until now, there have been five groups consisting of five to seven women in the Time4Help Finland project. Almost all the participants were over 45 years old and working either in their own company or in other organisations. There were no other prerequisites. Many of the participants also had care responsibilities in addition to their career: it was not mandatory to have these responsibilities in order to attend.

Before a training and coaching programme started, the project manager discussed with all the participants first separately and then in a joint meeting where the group agreed on the objectives and practical arrangements like times, dates, duration and place. Based on the discussions, the project manager suggested a facilitator for the group or the group suggested a facilitator they preferred. Typically, the groups met five times in meetings lasting 3–4 hours, and if necessary, the facilitator could arrange short Q&A online discussions (1–2 hours) between the meetings. Next, we present insights on the groups and their dynamics by describing each group as a case.

3.1. Case 1

The first group consisted of sole entrepreneurs. Four of them knew each other beforehand as they had already started to develop joint service offerings before forming a Time4Help training group. The group wished to work based on service design methods, because they were somewhat familiar to them. The selected facilitator was a service design specialist. The objective of the group was quite clear: to develop service packages consisting of services offered by all the participants, which could be offered to customers together. Despite this clear objective, the service design process raised issues which the group members had not discussed before, making hidden tensions visible. Due to this, the members had different views about the joint target. Maybe because of the tensions, the group members could not agree on an appropriate division of tasks between the meetings.

Therefore, the meetings had to be used for joint working, not for sharing results. Although the group did not complete their joint service packages during the Time4Help process, four of them continued working together with the same issues after the process.

This training model was hard to understand at first: what it was and what could be done within it. But after getting that, there was a real need, and the training served the group well As we knew each other, it was not peer learning, but a co-development process. (Participant, Case 1)

3.2. Case 2

The second group consisted of women working in the travel and customer experience industries. Most of them were owners of small businesses. At the beginning, the objective of the group was to develop new services for each company, but also to discuss possible cooperation opportunities. Wellbeing at work did not come up as an important theme in the preliminary discussions. However, the situation very soon changed, after the COVID-19 pandemic started closing the women's livelihoods. Therefore, the focus of the group very soon shifted into wellbeing at work and life issues. The facilitator of the group stated even that it was not certain whether the women and their businesses would have survived the hard times without the mental support of this group of peers who they could talk to. It was also important that the small group could meet face-to-face, so that trust between members could be built. Another trust-building technique was to have the meetings by turns in each participant's facilities. This was a way to give each woman an opportunity to tell her own story in her own environment and on her own terms. The women did not know each other too well in the beginning, so this was an entirely new group of peers for them. Even though the wellbeing themes were the most important, at least some business cooperation was also started during the process. Moreover, the process strengthened the women's networking, as they continued their meetings after the Time4Help process ended.

The COVID-19 spring brought uncertainty. In the end, we decided that there was no choice but to continue developing new services. (Participant, Case 2)

Every meeting was really empowering. The group gave me energy and helped me to cope. (Participant, Case 2)

3.3. Case 3

The third group consisted of women working in patient and family associations who wanted to develop their activities and start offering joint services to the private or public sector. The group had a shared challenge and objective – the shrinking public funding for associations and the need to co-develop new services they could offer to customers together. The work of the group focussed on service co-development with service design methods. However, as working in patient and family associations is sometimes very consuming, wellbeing at work issues were also discussed. In the end, even though no joint service offerings were launched, the participants wrote funding applications together for a new joint development process. The participants learned about service design and service co-development. The process also strengthened their networks: even though most of the participants knew each other beforehand, they learned to better understand each other's values and ways of doing things. In a way, this case dealt with women's wellbeing at a meta-level, because most of the associations in Case 3 offered services for women, for example, for domestic violence victims or people who cared for sick or elderly family members.

*Service design methods have not been used in associations before.
It was eye-opening for many to see how things could be developed.
(Participant, Case 3)*

3.4. Case 4

The participants in the fourth case live in a small town in a rural area of South Savo. The basic idea of the originator of the group was to get an opportunity to develop her own services in a service design process and increase women entrepreneurs' networking in the town. However, as most of the participants worked in the health or social care sectors, development of joint service offerings was also seen as possible. Some of the women already had their own businesses, but some were still thinking about establishing a business. Thus, they were at different stages in their development processes, therefore experiencing the process and its benefits differently. However, they had in common that the shrinking public funding and ongoing institutional changes in the Finnish care sectors were rocking the bases of the women's livelihoods and making their future uncertain. Also, it is characteristic of the health and care sectors that work there is very consuming and poorly paid. Therefore, participants often came to the meetings exhausted and frustrated, and conse-

quently they had no resources to discuss service development or advance their businesses, but the discussions revolved around wellbeing issues, although wellbeing issues were also discussed because some of the participants developed services for tackling these issues in the care sectors. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the group met in virtual meetings, where trust building was not easy and not at all adequate for this kind of ill-defined and emergent process. However, it is not yet clear where the process will end up.

*I have complex feelings – did I listen to the others, and did they listen to me It would be nice to meet people in real life.
(Participant, Case 4)*

3.5. Case 5

It was challenging to get the fifth group organised, as the originator of the group was not committed to gathering the group together in the end. Now the group is still looking for a couple of new members. The members are small shop owners thinking about developing their own services. The focus is wellbeing and digitalisation, increasing the participants' digital skills and developing new digital services, because COVID-19 shrank the number of customers and the revenues in the shops. The women knew each other quite well beforehand. Therefore, difficult issues could also be discussed in a confidential, encouraging and optimistic atmosphere, even though some of the women had challenges balancing work and family. The process is still ongoing, and it is not clear where it will end up.

When you have a start-up company you have to take steps even though it is not certain whether there is something under your step. You need to have courage and dreams and you have to think about yourself. (Participant, Case 5)

Next, we discuss our observations based on the cases and draw conclusions based on them.

4. DISCUSSION OF THE CASES

In this chapter, we wanted to discuss how tailored training and coaching programmes enhance mature women's career development, lifelong learning and networking and help them to reach an appropriate work–life balance.

Originally, Case 1 was meant to be a straightforward co-development process, but it revealed that a process can be full of surprises. The themes discussed in the group went deeper than in regular day-to-day discussions between business partners. However, if the participants had not known each other beforehand, it can be assumed that the process would not have gone deep enough to reveal the hidden tensions. Finding these tension points, however, was necessary to build cooperation on a solid ground and proceed further onto the next level. Also, facilitators in these kinds of fuzzy service design processes must be aware that the process can take surprising turns, and they must have methods and tools to handle the surprises. For the training organiser, a major challenge is to find a suitable facilitator for each group. The facilitators must be knowledge experts, but more notably, they must be person experts. The most important task of the facilitator is to ask the right questions and help the group discuss and share their thoughts. Yet, the issues under discussion are decided by the group.

The role of a facilitator is to build a safe time and place, a bubble where you can spend a moment together with unfinished issues, where they can be tested together on the verge of uncertainty.
(Facilitator, Case 1)

Because the participants in Case 2 did not know each other too well beforehand, the group brought them new support and cooperation networks in the highly exceptional and uncertain times of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this case, it was also good that trust could be built in face-to-face meetings, because the group was so small that the COVID-19 restrictions did not halt the meetings. Furthermore, as the facilitator pointed out, trust helps build participants' self-esteem, which for its part increases trust.

The group offered an extremely important mental support Usually the same people, who always been in your life, reinforce your current thoughts. There were brand new people here.
(Participant, Case 2)

Case 3 was a shared learning process on service design and a rather straightforward business case. Also, there was a joint challenge of the changing operating environment of the associations. A joint challenge is apt to make the co-development process easier. However, this case also showed that, in the process, everyone must give something of herself. The group was a bit bigger than the other groups, and maybe this affected the commitment of some of the members. Thus, as in Case 1, inadequate understanding of the joint leadership of the group was an issue in Case 3. This case also showed

that the facilitator must respect the skills of the participants and speak their language to be able to guide the service design process.

*A strong factor in team building was the joint challenge of associations, i.e., the change in the operating environment.
(Facilitator 1, Case 3)*

The groups in Case 4 offered an important peer group for women working in the same sector, health and care, for discussing difficult issues, such as challenges of the sector, work–life balance, wellbeing at work and avoiding burnout. The process reflected, besides the participants' individuality, the sector's characteristics. This case reflects the global challenge of women, as many women work in the care sectors, but also care for their loved ones at home. These realities at work and home may entangle into a choking situation where perspectives narrow and resources are soon eaten up. In Case 4, we can see an example of this. However, the process is still ongoing, and it seems that the participants have not yet totally understood how the process works.

*A group of peers feels like a campfire where you can stop,
learn from others and about yourself ... I am pleased about the
differences in us and that I found soul sisters. (Participant, Case 4)*

Case 5 shows that an optimistic attitude is important in developing new services. It seems that even though some of the participants of Case 5 lived through difficult times in their personal and business lives, they still had good moods and adequate resources. If – as in this case – women have the ability to dream and see new opportunities for their businesses, for example, in digitalisation, they feel energised and want to learn new things. However, the process in Case 5 is still ongoing, and besides networking, results have not yet been seen.

To conclude, the cases in the Time4Help Finland project have been very different. This shows that the groups look like their participants. The only common denominator was that all the participants wanted to learn something new or find new meaning or change in their work and lives by making better use of their skills. Otherwise, the groups were very different. They defined their objectives and themes to be discussed. Consequently, some of the processes sailed in the shallows and some in deep waters. A facilitator just has to ask the right questions, and the participants take the process forward.

*Lecturing would not work for women who are over 45 years old.
The group has so much expertise that it is better to let them give
the lecture. (Facilitator, Case 2)*

There were challenges in group dynamics in many of the groups. A typical challenge was that there was a core group and an outer circle. Building

trust and commitment between participants was far more difficult in virtual meetings arranged due to COVID-19 than in face-to-face meetings. However, as one of the facilitators said, every team process is successful because every time you attend a group you learn something new about yourself; learning is a continuous project until you die.

The more you work in teams, the better you understand ... the ideal place for you to be There are wellbeing challenges at work – at least partly due to incompatibility. (Facilitator, Case 4)

5. CONCLUSION

Empowerment, knowledge sharing between peers and peer mentoring played a major role in all the cases in the Time4Help Finland project. Peer networks are especially important for sole entrepreneurs, whose work-related networks may be rather scarce. This is particularly important for entrepreneurs who need to cope with challenging family situations. Furthermore, service design methods were learned in the groups. The study circle approach seems to be a good approach to service design processes, in particular, as both study circles and service design are based on participatory methods. Much of the participants' feedback tells us that service design was opened to the participants in a whole new way. In addition, completely new partnerships emerged, and new services and service packages were co-created.

There were five to seven participants in our groups. In small rural towns it is challenging to gather larger groups. Furthermore, small groups are more participant centred, and that was what we sought. However, if there are five participants or fewer in a group, and if one or two are absent, the group weakens and the work begins to resemble individual sparring more than co-development. From the point of view of implementation, a group of seven participants seemed to be the most flexible and sufficiently diverse. But on the other hand, the fifth group with only three permanent members seemed to be exceptionally tight.

The effects of COVID-19 were substantial. Firstly, it was difficult to gather groups, as the situations of potential participants changed radically and rapidly. Secondly, some of the group meetings were transferred online. This had an impact on trust building and group dynamics, as well as working techniques. In terms of content, COVID-19 caused serious business challenges for the participants in all groups, although the challenges were different for different groups. Due to this, the resilience and wellbeing of participants rose to a significant role and peer support was important to all.

*This group is like a rope, which you can hold on to get forward.
(Participant, Case 5)*

In COVID-19 times, new techniques of doing things had to be invented. The shift towards digital tools was necessary, but it was also remarkable how smoothly this happened considering the age and gender of our target group. This must be taken into account in the project results, as digitalisation is important for mature women if they want to stay involved in working life. Learning new things – even if you are compelled to do so – is always good. In some of the cases, face-to-face meetings were also possible, which was positive for trust building. In the future, training programmes will probably consist of face-to-face meetings designed to build trust, to share what was learned and to reflect on things together. These will be special moments, supported by electronic environments with materials, but also opportunities to interact.

COVID-19 showed that no matter how well your things are, one can never know what will happen that revolutionises everything, and then you just must adapt. (Member of Time4Help steering group)

The participants in the cases seemed to be pleased with the possibilities to co-create the contents and methods used in the training. Consequently, organisations offering training or coaching must be able to identify people's needs better in the future. Some of the participants expressed their concerns about modern working life and culture, which seems to be highly competitive and does not offer adequate opportunities for personal development, leading easily to narrowing perspectives and burnout, especially if you at the same time have to consider care responsibilities in your family.

*I would hope that this model where we can get involved already in the planning phase of the training will become more common.
(Participant, Case 3)*

In some working places the competition was so fierce that you wanted to hide family-related things. (Participant, Case 1)

When following my own children, it seems that the accelerating rhythm of work today does not allow them to study alongside work The language related to work has changed, and it now emphasises anxieties (Participant, Case 3)

To sum up, the future of tailored training and coaching programmes built on the idea of study circles seems bright. These programmes are flexible and resonate with the current trends of lifelong learning. For mature women they

offer peer groups enhancing career development, lifelong learning and networking and help them towards a work–life balance. Peer groups develop participants' social and cooperative skills and other competences, which are increasingly valued on the labour market, at the same time valuing and building on the skills and experiences that the participants already have.

FURTHER MATERIAL

Microcourse: WoManager – design your career. (<https://shop.edufication.com/products/womanager-design-your-career>)

Time4Help Finland webpages. (<https://www.xamk.fi/en/research-and-development/time4help-finland/>)

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