



TALENT INCREMENTAL DEVELOPMENT IN MANAGEMENT: PERSPECTIVES ON SYSTEMATIC LEARNING IN A COMPLEX ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract: Many environmental factors currently challenge employees in management positions. Trends indicate an increasing role for a set of skills and abilities that are less technical and more related to analytical thinking, collaboration, motivation and continuous development of talents. This article proposes a conceptual model consisting of four modules that allow for self-management and are relatively easy to implement learning methods in HE. The model is based on the principles of a systems approach and the desired outcomes for successful professional development and is tailored to characteristics that promote the accumulation of knowledge and confidence in the learning talents over time.

Keywords: education, managerial skills, system thinking, talent management, learning roadmap

ПРОГРЕСИВНО РАЗВИТИЕ НА ТАЛАНТИ В МЕНИДЖМЪНТА: ПЕРСПЕКТИВИ ЗА СИСТЕМАТИЧНО ОБУЧЕНИЕ В КОМПЛЕКСНА СРЕДА

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Резюме: Много фактори на околната среда в момента отправят предизвикателство към служителите на мениджърски позиции. Тенденциите показват нарастваща роля на набор от умения и способности, които са по-малко технически и повече свързани с аналитично мислене, сътрудничество, мотивация и непрекъснато развитие на талантите. Тази статия предлага концептуален модел, състоящ се от четири модула, позволяващи самоуправление и са сравнително лесни за прилагане методи за обучение във висшето образование. Моделът се основава на принципите на системния подход и желаните резултати за успешно професионално развитие и е съобразен с характеристики, които насърчават натрупването на знания и увереност в обучаващите се таланти в течение на времето.

Ключови думи: образование, управленски умения, системно мислене, управление на таланти, пътна карта за обучение

Introduction

Not only the pandemic period, but also the numerous local and global tremors, partly caused by it, as well as the rise of the creation and application of artificial intelligence (AI) in a wide field of activities, have made the dynamics of the environment visible to everyone (Taleb 2010; see also WUI 2025¹). In fact, AI can be seen as a new digital revolution or at least a new powerful momentum in the digital transition that began to unfold three decades ago. It is its catalytic power that raises questions about the challenges and opportunities in different industries. Perhaps the biggest myth that has been floating around was the loss of jobs. Considering the fact that every significant technical leap in history has caused concerns about the economic well-being of entire communities, but in the end the layers have adjusted, we can expect the soon formation of development directions that all stakeholders will comply with. However, this does not mean that “waiting” for the rearrangement in the creation of added value through increased automation should be

¹ “World uncertainty index” covers 143 countries, and updates in every quarter following the data available from the Economist Intelligent Unit reports; the latest data shows that the level of uncertainty worldwide is among the highest in last 17 years (getting closer to the pandemic year of 2020).

a passive process. On the contrary, in the last five years, predictions and proposals about the formats and effects of combining the human and technical factors have abounded against the general background of the slower adaptation of companies around the world to the implementation of AI. The turbulence of the environment (Kotler & Caslione 2009) can be illustrated with a curious example. The rise of social networks about two decades ago catalyzed the need for the position of a “digital marketing” expert and it seemed unshakable. What is currently happening, however, is that the work of an entire team of such specialists is completely replaceable by AI assistants that are capable of analyzing existing content and creating new content (both text and images) for an advertising campaign for several media channels. This happens only in a few minutes and it is just one of many applications of AI in the overall work of marketing activities in a company (Kantar, 2025).

In this train of thoughts, the article argues that in an increasingly complex environment, measures for the development of effective employees/workers should not go through the prism of even more complex programs of education and professional training, but on the contrary - through simpler ones in terms of content, and also open to modification and adaptation over time. In support of this, both studies among professionals on the development of core skills over the past ten years is used, and an attempt is made to form a conceptual model (structure) of what sustainable complexes of skills and for what purposes they should be formed. Last but not least, it is explained how they interact, since the strength of the individual in a professional sense is based on openness to lifelong learning and in a sufficient “volume” and degree, according to the requirements of each of the proposed modules. As will also be clarified, it is no coincidence that they are labeled “management”. However, the latter refers to “self-management”. As Dracker pointed out (1999, 19), “It’s up to you to carve out your place, to know when to change course, and to keep yourself engaged and productive during a work life...”. Self-management training (learning pathway) should take priority in colleges and universities, since knowledge becomes obsolete too quickly to be the main focus of curricula. If the individual does not embrace the concept of constant openness to development, resilience and adaptation to the needs of his professional environment, s/he will exhaust him/herself or be lost too soon.

All of the above has a more general purpose, and that is to shed light on a more systematic approach to talent development. On the one hand, HEIs are particularly useful arenas for testing individual aptitudes and developing qualities, while, on the other hand, industry organizations (in which the respective learner will be formed as an “expert” later on) represent a breeding ground for the most effective use of talent and its modification and enrichment in the long term (Gagné 2008; Varkonyi 2014). In other words, talent should not only be sought as one specific individual among many possible individuals, but should be encouraged in every employee, otherwise HR programs could be inefficient and even counterproductive (W. Chan Kim & Mauborgne 2017; De Boeck *et al.* 2018). Moreover, the aforementioned concepts of “self-management” and “encouragement” are not at all intended as “wishful thinking”, as they are driven by the tendency to increasingly rely on “self-awareness” from an emotional, educational, and cultural perspective (Manz & Sims Jr., 1987; Goleman 1995; Meyer 2013; Erikson 2019; Landry 2019; WEF 2025). By relying on knowledge and a mindset that opens the door to talent autonomy both during university and internal training, retraining courses, etc., employers will drastically reduce the need for micromanagement and efforts to provide administrative incentives for their employees when it comes to lifelong learning.

Demand and development of skills.

The starting point for forming a new perspective on the system for flexible and adaptive behavior of talents was the observations of the sought-after qualities and skills by companies of different sizes and industries in Europe over the past few years. In their job position announcements, the emphasis has eloquently shifted from specific skills typical of the “specialist” to “atypical”, person-based requirements such as “proactive attitude”, “desire to learn”, “orientation towards results” and “ability to maintain motivation”. For managerial positions, experience in “project management” is frequently required as well. These observations were supported by the results of the periodic surveys undertaken by the World Economic Forum regarding the workforce. This source was chosen not because it is the only one available or most credible, rather because it offers, first, a global view and, second, its regularity implies the derivation of significant trends, especially with regard to the dynamic upheavals in the technological and hence in the business and educational environments in the last two decades. Even more specifically, we will refer to the “Skills Score” charts available in the reports to trace specific movements and predictions for the needs of professional development. Although it will be implied, it is appropriate to explicitly state at the outset that the data reflected by the WEF must be considered by the HEIs and relate directly to the way in which their curricula are designed.

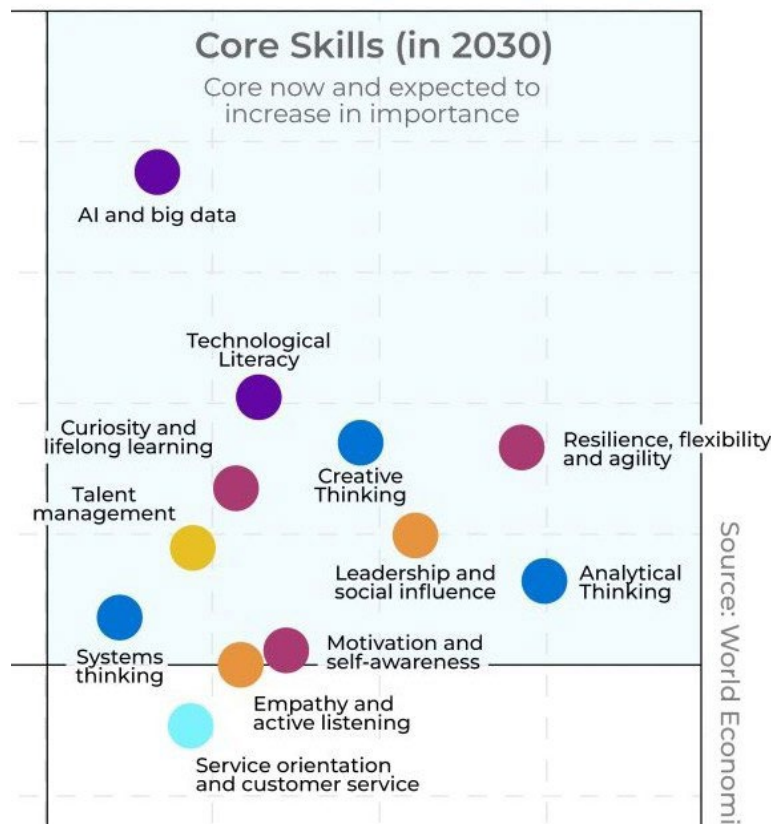


Fig. 1. The quadrant indicating the trend in the skill sets employers foresee will be both important and increasing by 2030.

Source: WEF 2025, 41.

The chart collects the responses of employers who consider certain skills essential in 2025 and the share of employers who expect certain skills to increase in importance by 2030 (WEF 2025, 40-42). Specifically, we are interested in the upper right quadrant (fig. 1), as that is where they are focused skills that are already key to organizations today and are expected to continue growing fast. While technological skills in data and AI (dots in purple) are expectedly at the forefront, this quadrant is actually dominated by “non-technical” skills. The “cognitive” (in blue) and “self-efficacy” (in dark red) groups have three representatives each, but the “working with others” (in orange) group is also listed with two specific skills (“leadership and social influence” and “empathy and active listening”).

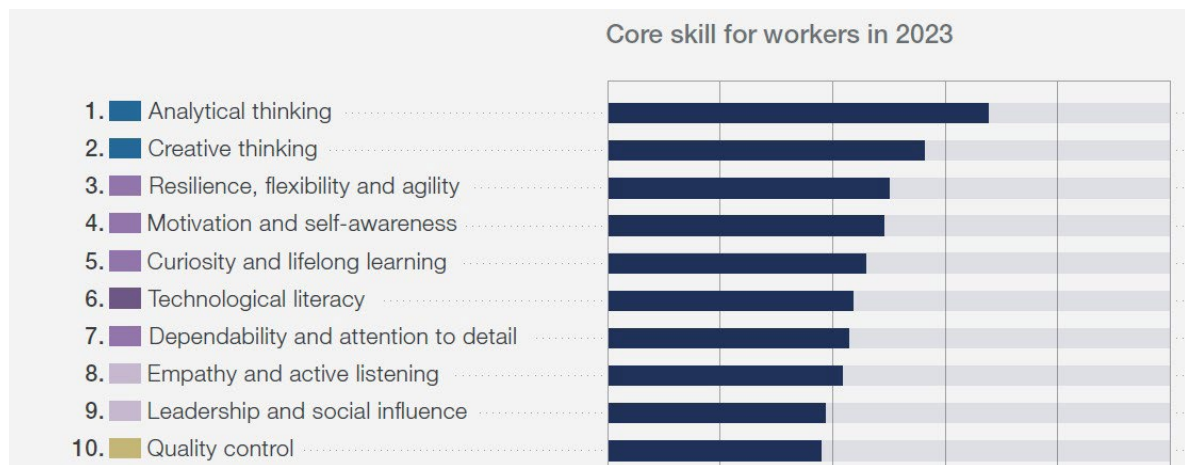


Fig. 2. Top ten of the skills considered being “core” for workers.

Source: WEF 2023, 38.

By comparison, data from the WEF reports (2016, 2020, 2023) shows that this trend has only intensified over the past decade, despite the nominal movement over time. In 2016, the organization’s research captured the growing importance of “cognitive” and “systems skills” for employers. In 2020, companies surveyed highly ranked the skills in “critical thinking and analysis” and “problem solving” as increasing in importance, but then also the “self-management” group emerged, as it includes *active learning*, *resilience*, *stress tolerance* and *flexibility* (WEF 2020, 26-27). Two years ago (2023), workers’ responses also indicated a reformulation of the set of skills they considered important (fig. 2). “Analytical thinking” was leading their ranking, but “resilience and flexibility,” “self-awareness” and “lifelong learning” already took positions above “technical skills.” Curiously, “systems skills” was not listed in the top ten of the ranking at that moment, although it was on the eleventh position.

Systematic approach 1: basic managerial modules

Following what was stated in the above section, we can make an attempt to form a model of action for talent development in the conditions of dynamics and lifelong learning. This model (structure) is conceptualized in a (road)map of the management modules (fig. 3) driving the process – *Project* and *Time management* on the one hand, and *Learning* and *Communication management*, on the other. Drucker’s point of

view on the issue already mentioned concerns self-development as responsibility of “knowledge workers”, but the concept proposed below applies to the “knowledgeable worker”, insofar as everyone can take advantage of the guidelines of the map to develop themselves regardless of the field of activity, the skills required and the responsibilities assumed. This is so because it is based on two fundamental processes - *Professional* and *Personal development* (the horizontal axis), which in turn has two main and universal manifestations - at the *Individual* and *Team level* (the vertical axis).

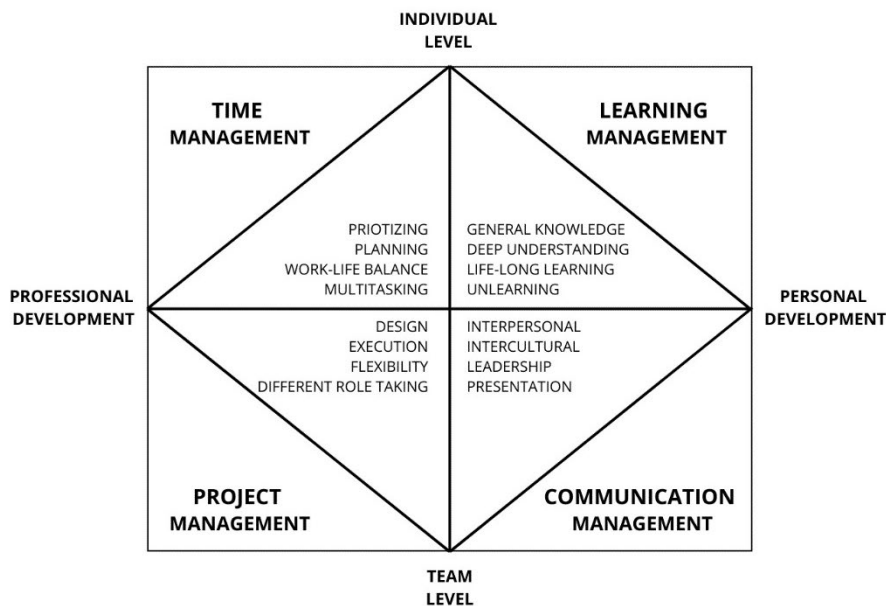


Fig. 3. The four modules of talent development (road)map.

Source: the author.

In terms of content, the map, as indicated, also lists the characteristics of each of the modules. It is appropriate to start with Time management, since time is the only constant in the model and most often a main issues in organizing and performing tasks in relation to the set goal. Its management is practically impossible without prioritizing tasks, arranging their execution in a timeframe (Adair & Allen 2003; Forsyth 2007). It is the cause of the burnout effect, disappointment and avoidance, and is related to the balance of personal and work life as well. In a certain sense, 21st Century worker cannot completely avoid multitasking, since it includes not only official tasks, but also personal obligations and those to communities, but it should be bearable or short-term. Although we have “catch” time in calendars, clocks, and fixed working hours, it is a highly subjective, but also culturally based dimension (Hostede *et al.* 2010; Mayer 2013). In the first case, it is about one’s own pace of learning, one’s own way of arranging actions to achieve goals and deal with objective conditions (the presence or absence of the necessary means and dealing with the space limits). In the second case, we have an imposed sense and handling of time from the society in which we grew up (different degrees from mono- to polychronic poles of the spectrum), but understanding this can make us highly flexible and adaptable, to correct and modify our behavior, especially in contacts with col-

leagues and clients from another culture. Lastly, time management also refers to the ability to manage the effects of certain decisions and actions, either assessing that they will manifest themselves further in time or, conversely, seeking to accelerate them.

Regarding Project management (bottom left), we do it anyway, to the extent that at least every day of ours or the completion of some unimportant activity such as shopping for dinner is already a project that we think about and plan in terms of investing energy, resources and time in order to be as efficient as possible. Learning the principles and practices of project management as career growth driver is a necessary and useful step for optimizing our work and confidently entering new projects, which are still “unchartered territories” for us. Moreover, in most cases, projects are an excellent opportunity to enter into different roles (regarding influencing results and establishing relationships with other people), and to learn from activities, events and other people’s professional experience (Kars-Ünlüoğlu *et al.* 2024).

On the right side of the model, where *professionalism* is linked to *personal development*, are the management modules responsible for Learning and acquiring Communication competencies that we often mistakenly believe we have at birth. In both modules, the scope of the profession, position, age, and the number and magnitude of goals affect the desire (motivation) and the way in which knowledge and skills are acquired. In the context of the model, it is important to emphasize that we use “learning” here precisely in the meaning given by Senge - “expanding the ability to produce results” (2006, 130), which no organization can achieve if the individuals within it do not seek “mastery” (in their field, specific position and responsibilities). It is now clear that the awareness of how quickly both knowledge and skills, sometimes applied for years, changes and becomes obsolete, is the key to development and active, constant learning (albeit at different speed and in different ways), rather than sporadic and chaotic (unsystematic). All this is a driver of both career-long learning and gaining expertise, as well as gaining confidence in changing environment. It is no coincidence that “Unlearning” is listed also, since, in fact, it is considered to be (probably) the most difficult action in the module. That is why Bonchek (2016) not complements, rather overly corrects Senge’s concept of the “learning organization”, indicating that it is not at all about knowledge *per se*, but about *the lack of awareness and/or unwillingness to change our mental models* in the first place. Precisely, he points out the following: “Unlearning is not about forgetting. It’s about the ability to choose an alternative mental model or paradigm. When we learn, we add new skills or knowledge to what we already know. When we unlearn, we step outside the mental model in order to choose a different one.”

Communications are too broad a topic to go into detail here, and there is no actual need to do so. However, there is no doubt about two circumstances - first, they are not in the sphere of “ownership” and actions of organizations, but of individuals, and, second, the individual learns to communicate throughout his/her life, as in the hyper-connected world s/he has to communicate more and more, and transmit and receive more and more information on a daily basis. In a professional respective, even if one is the greatest expert in a field, without being able to share ideas, opinions and decisions, the usefulness or effectiveness of his/her expertise loses its significance, and in managerial positions this is downright disastrous. By the term “Communications” we should understand the entire spectrum of the concept - from awareness and modification of style, channels, context (high and low) and the characteristics of the recipients of information to specific skills such as com-

mand of foreign languages, understanding and mastering professional terminology, presentation skills, etiquette of communication in person, by phone, email or in an online meeting. Also, intercultural communication should not be perceived as “easy” just because someone has knowledge of the specific language of communication, as communicating in an international context also involves knowledge of values, time-consideration, hierarchies, body language and dress code, emotions, temperaments, boundaries and taboos (Senge 2006; Hostede *et al.* 2010; Mayer 2013).

Systematic approach 2: synthesis

If we zoom up the map a little bit, we will be able to give more arguments in favor of the proposed approach to talent development. From what is presented here (Fig. 4), it is clear that two axes (built on four concepts) are combined. First of all, let us look at the short- and long-term horizons and benefits of development (i.e. vertical axis). The tags “Contextual” and “Intertextual” refer to the *Individual level* (the upper two quadrants) the content of training and the framework (Time) are limited according to the specific need (goal), opportunities, and capacity, while at the *Team level* (below) we have a “multiple” situation, i.e. one in which employees with different competencies and roles are expected to perform diverse tasks within a given project. These two complementary concepts are taken from the literary analysis, but have the same meaning, namely that in the first situation the learner finds him/herself in his/her own (most often controlled by him/herself) situation, and in the second, s/he learns and develops in a complex environment, including the factors set by the characteristics and goals of the project and the competencies, roles and capacities of the team members. It is understood that while the “project” sets the framework for actions and interactions, the Communications quadrant comes into play to react and work efficiently according to the set parameters (requirements) of the project.

On the other hand, the “Frames” (on the left) and the specific “Content” (on the right) are located on the horizontal axis. They need less explanation, even more after what has just been indicated. However, in order to avoid ambiguity, their role is to define that there is a difference and mutual influence between what (content) and in what parameters (in what relation and when) the learning/training takes place.

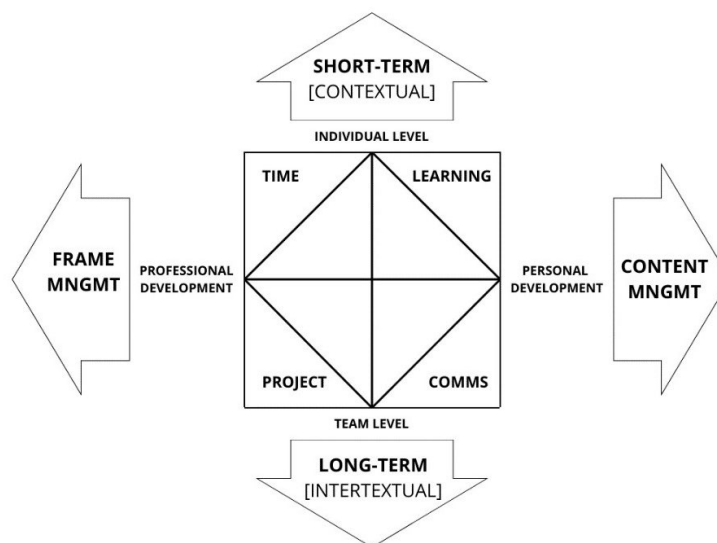


Fig. 4. Conceptual mapping of the managerial complex in talent development.

Source: the author.

In view of the explanation of the model, its flexibility is demonstrated by several hypothetical examples. Even if s/he does not work on a project in a team of colleagues, the individual employee still enters into a “team mode” with the client or clients for whom s/he performs the task. Also, s/he will not develop as an expert and professional if a circle of competencies and knowledge (i.e. the framework) are not outlined as useful and sought for updating and enrichment when necessary. In other words, if s/he is a doctor, s/he will devote time and ways (projects) to fill the framework as much as possible with “Content” (on the right) - active (independent) learning and/or through shared learning with others, which, however, requires communication skills as well. The “Framework” can be compared to the job description that we usually encounter for a given position, but without taking away its dynamics. For example, a restaurateur (manager) may want to expand his/her *framework* by increasing his/her knowledge of HR management, because in the event of an expansion of the restaurant, there will be a need to hire more people and therefore the manager’s responsibilities will expand. In different situation, s/he wants to gain knowledge and applicable skills in digital marketing because this will improve his/her expertise to make the organization more attractive for the clients and efficient in operations. To this end, s/he should spend time turning his/her training into a “project”, but if in the long run the learning process and subsequent activities to improve the online presence of his/her restaurant harm the quality of his/her work as an operations manager, s/he will stop implementing them (instead, an expert in the field should be hired, if this is really necessary to “balance the system”, if we refer to the words of Senge 2006). Of course, there is also the opposite possibility - the restaurateur may be interested in moving to the position of manager of online advertising and communications of the restaurant completely, since s/he knows the business well and can increase demand, and hand over his current job to someone else.

In a more common example, the head chef of the restaurant decides to change the menu to attract more or different visitors. This is a serious change for the entire restaurant, so s/he enters into a “mode” as if starting a “project” that requires time, finances and relevant research. The learner him/herself must first acquire new knowledge, and then skills, with the help of consultants and written recipes (communications), spend time and effort in researching the possibilities, then practice and experiment (active learning), and gradually select the new menu to be offered from a specific moment onwards.

HEIs application

The maps presented above are not drawn directly from the work of Senge (2006) but they have a lot in common with his concept of the systems way of thinking. Moreover, it was named by him a “discipline” [*smth. that can be learned and applied*] and it concerns both an organization that wants to survive and progress in current conditions, and at the individual level (Hill 2004; Cheese *et al.* 2008). However, the author’s influence is expressed in another key principle, which was already marked at the beginning - “self-management”. Senge paid special attention to taking responsibility and the negative effects of looking for an “enemy” or “stuck in one’s own position” (or, put in other words, in one’s individual “context”). And since these conceptual maps seem quite fixed, the question arises who is responsible for the balance in the system? The answer is precisely **the learning talent**. Maps (diagrams) are systems for approaching learning, adaptation, and advancement, and the inter-

connections in them provide the feedback effects indicated by Senge, but first, the learner (talent) must understand the principles of the system, as well as recognize what are the “small” and “large leverage effects” in order to maintain balance and meet the challenges of change while achieving the next goal (stage of balance).

While it is understandable that it is difficult for universities and colleges to accept their increasingly fading role as knowledge “hubs”, to which a limited part of society has access, it is clear that the shift to “learning how to learning” is happening slowly. However, they are not a victim, but a very important catalyst in the course of progress. Their role as an important environment for knowledge (sharing and co-creation) and a testing ground for creating professional habits and an open mindset is more than necessary (Koch *et al.* 2015). Moreover, they would help many workers at the beginning and throughout their careers to cope with the increasing demands of their professions and, above all, to know what to do to fit better into it. In Europe at least, universities of applied sciences are taking steps in this direction (examples in RUC.dk 2025; NH Stenden.com 2025), changing their focus regarding the goals of higher and professional education and the way of teaching.

Although rigorous academic training and the subsequent career in theory and fundamental science differ from the narrower professional training in universities and colleges, the systematic approach is fully applicable to them too, because the principles remain the same. As for the preparation of future professionals, universities and vocational colleges can introduce them to self-management of their careers through a set of already familiar tools for engaged learning - teamwork (including entering into different roles), project-oriented learning, developing presentation skills and habits for quick information search, flipped classroom, training in interpersonal and intercultural communications, and the closest possible connection with practice through internships and commitments to problems of a specific organization and profession (incl. job shadowing, hands-on experience/learning by doing, and expert mentorship).

Conclusions

Being a **professional** is a set of *behavioral* skills that lead to growth over time, while being an **expert** means possessing *knowledge*, but also sufficient ability of *understanding* when and where to apply it, when to enrich it, or even exclude and abandon it as irrelevant. Following the dynamics of the environment and the difficulties of organizations to follow it, universities and colleges can increase their effectiveness by taking the initiative to train in more flexible thinking and more active learning behavior. The proposed conceptual model responds to the sought-after qualities and skills of employees from various industries around the world, offering four (self)management modules that increase both the motivation for learning and development, as well as the skills of self-organization and collaboration.

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