Communal workplace learning in financial administration digitalization

Laura Bordi, Sanna Nuutinen & Kirsi Heikkilä-Tammi

Financial administration is one of the fastest digitalising fields of business today. Software robotics provide new possibilities to automate tasks and processes, which may considerably change the contents and nature of many financial administration jobs. This requires continuous learning in the workplace as well as organisational structures and practices that enable and support the learning process. In discussions concerning learning needed in the digitalisation of jobs, the focus is often on formal learning (e.g. courses and training) and on individual skills and competencies. This rather narrow angle often ignores the essential role of informal learning that takes place in the everyday activities of the work community. When we look at learning and skill-development in the changing work, it is essential to acknowledge their communal nature – information seeking and use as well as the adoption of new tools and working methods usually happen in interaction between the members of the work community, the tasks, and the tools. Communal learning is considered a prerequisite for actual lasting changes in work practices, as learning in the workplace is heavily tied to the cultural norms and conventions of the work community. Communal approach to workplace learning is also connected to employees' agency, such the development of work practices, professional identities and skills in certain social, cultural and material conditions.

In our study, the aim is to examine digitalisation-related communal learning practices of three financial administration organisations. The focus is on how software robotics are adopted to the work communities' activities and practices, how communal workplace learning can be supported in the organisations, how employees' agency is constructed in organisations and work communities' practices, and how employees' agency can be supported in digitalisation-induced change. The project is a qualitative action research comprising of both individual and group interviews as well as workshops. In this presentation, we present preliminary findings of employees and supervisors' interviews carried out in spring 2019. The method of Appreciative Inquiry is applied in the interviews. The method provides a fruitful framework for identifying and supporting already functional practices in the workplace as well as developing new ones. Identifying and recognising the existing beneficial practices is important, as those function as a springboard to developing new practices, skills and capabilities in the workplace.