

STUDY CIRCLE ON A DISTANCE

– *to build competence digitally*

The purpose of the study circle has been to investigate whether the concept of learning platform training can be a method for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to attract more and more qualified orders for forest services.

The study circle focused on a target group of forest owners who wanted to work with themselves in the role of forest owners and at the same time get to know their forest. Many of those who participated were not active forest owners at present, but had the desire to learn more. In recruitment, a specific focus has been on forest owners who recently acquired forests, women who owned forests and the next generation of forest owners. Based on the participants in the study circle, these groups had a good representation. Eighty-four forest owners participated, of which 42 completed the training. Based on the self-assessed follow-up, a general improvement in knowledge and increased security in the forest owner's own goals and decision-making is visible. They also more clearly identify themselves as forest owners after the study circle.

Implementation

Time planning, technical limitations and the user interface of the learning platform has constituted challenges for the study circle. Difficulties of navigating the functions and material of the learning was experienced by the participants. A prerequisite for participation was a certain level of digital competence, which also constituted a limitation in terms of participation. This underlines the great importance of user interface in the development or choice of a learning platform both for the participants but also for the organizer.

The planning horizon of a year constituted a challenge for the organizer with organizational resources (e.g. staff), procurement and communication, both within the organization and with the participants. The long period has also been a challenge for some participants in terms of experiencing the study circle as somewhat protracted, while others appreciated the extra time and flexibility.

The concept

As the study circle was planned and implemented, it's today possible to consider more in terms of a longer course. At least based on the traditional conceptualization and definition of what constitute a study circle. The participants were given the opportunity to influence the content of the study circle, with e.g. meetings in forest economics. The study circle has also included discussion forums and open Skype meetings for all participants to improve the dialogue.

Common in the definition of a study circle is that it should consist of a small group of people seeking knowledge together. However, the concept is also strongly associated with a tradition of grassroots- and locally based public education, often organized by study associations. The central basis of a study circle is that activities should reflect, and be part of, the participants' own interests and search for knowledge. A prerequisite is also the participants' active contribution to the study circle's planning and implementation. An important part of this search for knowledge is joint conversations and discussions. In the form and scope that this pilot was carried out, the study circle concept is therefore considered to be a too resource-intensive and imprecise service for SMEs to expand and develop their outreach. However, this is based on the specified purpose of educating forest



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owners in a similar way. A company probably has a specific purpose and idea of what the content of a study circle/course should be and how the implementation should be organized. If the participants are to be involved to a greater extent in the planning work and implementation, it would, for this purpose, require an even greater effort to organize. From this perspective, more targeted and defined courses would be seen as a more accessible and specific path for individual service companies.

However, with a less extensive purpose, a study circle could potentially also be fruitful for a company that is more focused on learning more about forest owners and developing new services in relation to these. A study circle more in line with the traditional definitions of the concept, which is based on a common and non-hierarchical learning, could be based on a company assisting with, for example, locations and materials in exchange for both knowledge and contacts. This setup would contribute to the resource claims being more modest in comparison with a more targeted study circle/course. However, this all depends on the purpose of the activity; which groups do you want to reach and what should the outcome consist of?

Conclusion

Through its methods and structure, the study circle has reached its defined target group and contributed to the participants gaining increased knowledge and security in ordering services. A major saving has been the access to course material from the Swedish Forest Agency. Similarly, the previous knowledge about, and the use of, the learning platform among the study circle leaders has been positive. For example, on cost efficiency, the biggest improvement can be made through that the course is recurring. Also, by dividing it into more subject-specific and independent courses which can then be more easily marketed to specific groups. A shorter and better adapted course period would also support the share that would complete the course. Using digital channels/media is another aspect that would reduce costs.

The combination of digital and physical teaching elements has been positive and appreciated by the participants. For the social setting and practicalities, a physical introduction and a concluding meeting has been valuable. For companies, a final physical meeting could also be an excellent opportunity to present future options, both in terms of related educations and services.

PILOT SUMMARY



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