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Learning Journey

What are my professional objectives?

To answer this question, five university graduates went on a journey in order to explore the future of work.

Interview: Sarah Mühlberger

Five friends meet for a joint cooking session on an evening in spring; all of them just before graduating with a degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Witten/Herdecke University; all of them being worried: They do not know where to go from graduation.

Lia Meißner, 27 years old, Julian Römer, 28, Valentin Ihßen, 25, Anna-Lena Hahn, 24, and Jonas Friedrich, 26, decide to jointly tackle the problem and go on a learning journey: For three days they drive across Germany and talk to different people, from the solo self-employed to the corporate manager. The idea behind: To learn how work may be like in the future. Almost by chance, the students find a plan for their own future on their journey.

Thinking of entering the professional world gave you pains. What is it precisely that worried you?

Valentin Ihßen: We had the impression that there is only a choice between security and liberty: The traditional permanent employment from nine to five in the office every day, without thinking about things touching you any longer. And on the other hand, networks in which it is possible to work independently, but in which – at least according to our bias – you have to work permanently under precarious circumstances. We didn't want neither nor.

Have your previous working experiences been negative then?

Anna-Lena Hahn: Not at all. I always enjoyed doing my internships and perceived them as very fulfilling. At the same time I had the impression to completely immerse myself in the respective organisation. My private life was on hold during these phases as any time, energy and attention was absorbed by the job. That puzzled me, and I thought to myself that I did not want to live my life this way for the next 40 years.

What did you want to find out on your learning journey?

Jonas Friedrich: We asked ourselves how we in responsible positions will be able to advance projects and ideas while still working in a reasonable way and staying healthy. Of course, everybody has realised in the meantime that we live in the age of acceleration; many people suffer from burnout at the age of 30 or 40.

So you hope for working conditions allowing a better work-life balance?

Valentin Ihßen: It is not my idea at all to draw a clear line between job and free time. I am talking more about seeing a sense in my job on the one hand and being able to not letting it intrude my private life too much on the other.

What sparked the idea to go on a learning trip?

Lia Meißner: We could see that we would not be able to answer such a complex question concerning the future of work by sitting at the desk alone and philosophising, poring over books or studying theories, but rather by taking action. That's how we used to know it from our studies.

Valentin Ihßen: At our university, the concept of entrepreneurship is very broad; it does not necessarily mean to establish or manage a company, but to foster education: To invite interesting people to join the university as lecturer and to talk with the dean about changes in teaching. During the seminars, we have learned a lot about self-organisation and learning in organisations.

Anna-Lena Hahn: So the idea emerged to find new approaches being already out there. Who has the courage to do something new? Where does somebody give it a try? In the same way we usually travel to discover new things, we wanted to travel to find the future of work. It was great to talk about the topic and at the same time observe the people we talked to: How do they enter the conversation? Are they stressed out or relaxed? Do they answer the phone during our conversation? How do colleagues deal with this person?

Which criteria did you lay down for choosing your interlocutors?

Valentin Ihßen: We have tried to visit businesses as diverse as possible: from young start-ups to corporations like Daimler. A family business such as Vaude naturally discusses the future of work differently compared to a loose network like Zentrale Intelligenz Agentur, Berlin; a manager such as Thomas Sattelberger has a different view than a futurologist like Franz Kühmayer. All of them were very interested in the learning outcomes of our journey and wanted us to tell them about it.

Was one of your aims to introduce yourselves personally without the hassle of applying?

Julian Römer: We have chosen our dialogue partners in a far too unspecified way for this intention. And none of us runs the risk of starting a job in a corporation.

What has inspired you the most during your journey?

Valentin Ihßen: Anna Kaiser of Tandemploy, for example, who had the problem that the working environment did not really fit her concept. So she turned her problem into a start-up: organising job sharing.

Anna-Lena Hahn: Also the question: Does work still have to be paid according to traditional remuneration models; i.e. I contribute my time and receive money for it? Wouldn't it be far more inspiring for us if we would receive a small basic income and thus had much more leeway for projects?

Jonas Friedrich: I also found Thomas Sattelberger's approach interesting. His advice: "If you work in projects and have the impression the situation may become precarious, take out a peer-to-peer insurance with friends being in a similar situation. Join forces with 25 people, each of whom pays a monthly rate of 100 or 200 euros. This way you can support those who sometimes find themselves without any projects."

That sounds like you have learned from start-ups and consultants in particular – and less from large companies.

Lia Meißner: Not only. We have met enthusiastic engineers at Daimler's innovation workshop. They are backed up by a worldwide network of colleagues with great expertise. For each problem there are colleagues available they can contact – and the corresponding resources are provided for this purpose as well.

Julian Römer: And a company such as Vaude, a family business from Baden-Württemberg, that seems to be rather conservative at first glance, is able to integrate the new working world into traditional structures. The result is that more women than men are working there, that many men take their parental leave and that the pay differences between management and lower levels are rather small.

Valentin Ihßen: It was also a very interesting fact that the Working Hours Act was mentioned only at Daimler, one of the last enterprises we visited, when we asked which working hour models are feasible. The fact that the working conditions are incorporated into law had not been an issue before, despite the fact that we had discussed working hour models during the whole trip.

One of your questions was aimed at working in a healthy way. Did you find an answer to this question?

Anna-Lena Hahn: Several, completely different answers. We met somebody who worked exactly six hours a day. Somebody else said: I just finish my projects; meaning that I may work into the night each day for eight weeks, but then I'll take three months off again occasionally.

Valentin Ihßen: I have realised that everybody is responsible for his or her own way of healthy working. You have to draw the line yourself or look for the concept that fits your own demands. If I cannot be productive at nine in the morning, but I am perfectly capable of working well until midnight, then I have to look for structures supporting this concept. This will turn more and more into a skill: knowing what you need and getting it yourself.

What will you make of the diverse impressions and insights you gained during your journey?

Jonas Friedrich: As we always had to move on immediately, we didn't talk for half an hour in the car after each conversation. We were all pondering by ourselves and, only then, we reflected: What have we learned? Where do things overlap?

Lia Meißner: We were careful not to trivialise the impressions of the others in our group. We didn't intend at all to merge the different views into one.

Anna-Lena Hahn: We met again six and twelve weeks after the journey to find out which impressions still stuck in our mind. During our meetings we also noticed how well we were able to work together. For it was work after all: We organised the journey, reflected and recorded the results. And I have realised rather quickly: This is exactly the way I would like to work. This inspires me; this gives me energy and drive.

What does this mean for your professional future?

Valentin Ihßen: We want to continue working together. We could imagine the format of this learning journey being implemented at university in order to gain more practical experience during seminars, but it may also be a format for graduates.

Hence, learning journeys as a means for professional orientation?

Lia Meißner: Yes, but not only. In fact, the learning journey principle is always applicable whenever people make decisions. This may be a personal decision like: What will I do after graduating? But it could also be interesting for politicians trying to get information on a topic at different locations or for enterprises interested in strategy development.

Jonas Friedrich: Franz Kühmayer said it is often quite easy to imagine the perfect world of the day after tomorrow. However, the challenge is to implement the transition: from status quo to ideal. And I believe such journeys are suitable for this, too.

Julian Römer: In the long run, this will not be the only method we would like to offer. At the moment it is decisive to find an infrastructure and legal form for our network and just not to establish a company in order to sit together from nine to five.

But rather?

Anna-Lena Hahn: We all have implemented projects already, everybody for him- or herself. In doing so, we want to support each other in the future, place orders with each other and ask each other for advice. On the other hand, we would like to try out something new together. For this, we will start an agency.

Lia Meißner: Currently, we are collecting ideas and potential projects. Which projects we will actually implement is of secondary importance. It's a cautious approach. And if it's a good idea and captivates others, it will last.

And if not? Will you all possibly end up with an employment contract?

Julian Römer: I can imagine to be employed on a regular basis at times, as a transitional solution, when I do not have enough other projects.

Lia Meißner: On our learning journey some people told us that they have some sort of plain job for paying their rent. This job may not always be fun, but this way they have time for projects that are close to their heart. Pursuing these projects may also create a sense of values.

Is there something you would do differently on a second journey concerning the future of work?

Julian Römer: Without really thinking about it we chose white-collar workers only. We didn't even think of asking staff checking the people entering and leaving at gate 17 at Daimler AG eight hours a day about what **they** think about the future of work. For sure we should have taken a look at completely different contexts, such as hospitals or factories.

Valentin Ihßen: We have experienced the change in the working world mainly through the lens of people for which this world works well. Successful people.

In the beginning there was a worry. Did the experiences you made change anything?

Julian Römer: For me, there is no longer a contrast between security and flexibility. The fact that it is possible to arrange your working environment in such a way that it fits your concept is very relieving.

Lia Meißner: And that I am able to take new professional decisions over and over again, depending on the respective phase of life.

Jonas Friedrich: In general, we all take the things concerning our future much easier now. It was also an important learning experience that these few days of preparation and a trip of three days only made such a difference to all of us; how motivated, confident and optimistic we are.

Valentin Ihßen: Before, we had imagined the future of work as dystopia. On our journey, however, we then met people who are happy with their work and are inspired by their work – in many different ways. And that was actually the most important insight. ---

An overview of the journey:

In Berlin, the students visited Philipp Albers and Mads Pankow of Zentrale Intelligenz Agentur and talked to Anna Kaiser of Tandemploy about job sharing. Afterwards, they met Franz Kühmayer of Frankfurter Zukunftsinstut at Gorki Park café in Berlin and talked about work 4.0. In Darmstadt, they met brand consultant Kurt Friedrich of Dialog-Plan and afterwards moderator Peter Fischer of Eurosysteam, who have jointly developed Tingtool, a professional tool for moderators. From there, they travelled to Sindelfingen to visit Daimler's innovation workshop and to Tettnang to talk with the outdoor outfitter Vaude about trust-based working hours. At the end of their journey the students went to Frankfurt Airport where they discussed the digital social market economy with Thomas Sattelberger.