STRATEGIES, TOOLS AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES TO SUPPORT COOPERATION BETWEEN ENTERPRISES AND SCHOOLS TO STIMULATE MINT INTEREST

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Abstract: For a long time enterprises have been engaged and taking social responsibility for people of the region. Their objective is to reduce social gaps and to match actual concrete challenges. Nowadays one of these challenges is the insufficient qualification of the young generation because they are not prepared for the rapid changes within the working environment. This is fundamental for the future development of Germany. A lot of well qualified employees are missing in several lines of business. Especially in our region you expect a manpower shortage within the traditional industrial branches and within the upcoming new technologies, e.g. Mechanical Engineering, IT- and nanotechnology. In spite of numerous MINT (Mathematics, Information technology, Natural science, Technology) projects and activities you could not sufficiently stimulate young people's interest in these domains. In light of the challenges of the Demographic change and the globalization hence all relevant regional forces have to be concentrated. Supported within a two years' project of the “Bertelsmann Stiftung” they started networking, they elaborated ideas, they launched partnerships and they performed projects. After the project phase active network partners take responsibility: they are continuing networking based on honorary and they could successfully engage politicians to support and fund the network further on.

This paper presents the regional strategy and a Web based tool that effectively supported making new partnerships. Based on documentation of existing ideas and projects new projects and partnerships will be supported within an internal moderated Intranet space.

Keywords: partnership, school, enterprise, cloud, social network

1. Introduction

Several trend analyses about the economic and social development in Germany within the next 10 to 15 years predict radical changes within two core areas (Norbert 2007): 1. arranging political intervention and using the social
capital, and 2nd changing business culture and value-added patterns. In the positive case – positive for economic as well as for society – they assumed that we have to match the following challenges:

- The government reduces its intervention and closely integrates citizens and companies (Co-regulation)
- The “working within projects” delivers 15% of value creation based on temporary, collaborative and global working processes
- Education and especially further education will be traded on private markets. Regular and modular education will be an essential asset class commonly used within a global networking market, but there are additional costs. The social gap will increase because citizen of lower income cannot participate.

But the impact of the Demographic Change with declining birth-rates requires – in contrast - increasing further education for more people. While nowadays companies are still able to get sufficient personnel this will become much difficult in future. There is already a lack of skilled staff within some growth industries because of decreasing interest in e.g. technical education.

For several decades our region “Saarland” has been changing the economic basis, away from coal mining and heavy industries to a high technology location. Based on engine building, automotive industry and IT additional growth branches like nanotechnology sprout. Many employers observe that apprentices are “not prepared to be trained”. That means that they not only lack some key competences like approach- and social competences, but the interest in subjects like mathematics, natural science and engineering is nationwide declining.

For many years enterprises and organisations in our region have been aware of this situation and they try to reverse this process by performing many activities and projects. Especially small and medium enterprises (SME) are operating in their local and social environment. They benefit from this Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) engagement as well by marketing.

Many of these activities are isolated initiatives. This “basic engagement” consisting of financial and material expenses has only a short time effect because there is no strategic relation to the involved company. “Strategic engagement” is related to the core business of the enterprise and has a long-time effect. It may have a big effect in the region but there is mostly no social impact.

At this point the method “Verantwortungspartner” (Partners in Social Responsibility) developed by the Bertelsmann Foundation will begin. Joint approaches to solving urgent regional issues are developed in cooperation with businesspeople, public policymakers and civic organizations. This could be the initial point for a sustainable regional development.

The arising cooperation network consists of persons who actively take responsibility for their regional development, e.g. honorary communities, non-profit organizations, educational networks, schools, governmental organizations, and employers.

This so called 3rd step of engagement consists of 3 phases. 6 German regions with specific regional topics have been supported by a moderated process supported by experts. Following the concept and implementation within our region Saarland will be presented.

2. Launching and sustainable implementation in the region with social impact

Buhr defines innovation as a “changing process”. So the method “Verantwortungspartner” is an innovation because – after one year - there will be a change of the cooperation between enterprises, public and civic partners expressed by the honorary and sustainable network called “Initiativkreis” (Buhr 2008). Within the same context experts persist in saying that the education sector in Germany will debilitate innovative energy regarding engineering qualifications (DIW 2005).

The method “Verantwortungspartner” is a cooperation offer from enterprises to politics and civil society. With the emphasis on personal responsibility the involved enterprises expect a high impact for the region. Therefore they agree for a start on a one year cooperation process. This process will be launched by three moderated phases.

Phase 1: Initiation phase

In this first phase fundamental questions will be clarified: questions concerning the cooperation, who will be involved, what are the vision, the aims and interests of the involved partners, what are the main problems in the region to be solved. Finally the whole working process with the Milestones will be planned.

In our region Saarland one employer from the new area “Nano- Technology” started the initiative. Supported by the ministry of economics the leading issue of the region “Youth, engineering and profession” was chosen. Suitable partners created the initial network called “Initiativkreis”. In this phase the ministry and the Bertelsmann Foundation supported the network with manpower for organization, documentation and moderation of the working process.
At the end of the initiative phase there was a public event. In cooperation with the Bertelsmann Foundation the network members already organized this event with top-class members and high publicity. Further active partnerships could be inspired.

Phase 2: Implementation phase

The following implementation phase was pushed on by three Milestone meetings and in addition numerous parallel working dates. In detail:

1<sup>st</sup> Vision, objectives and project ideas, recorded conventions
2<sup>nd</sup> Launch the planned projects
3<sup>rd</sup> Present project success and documentation

The result: 25 projects have been launched, five topics or target groups, mostly isolated activities, only some of them stayed for a longer time. There was high organizational effort for the partners and therefore good ideas are not directly promoted to potential further partners to realize them.

Missing points were:
- Sufficient contact to interested schools and enterprises once an idea was born
- Suitable ideas matching existing partnerships between enterprises and schools
- Sponsors to support realization of projects
- Organizational support for enterprises when launching a project

Phase 3: Sustainability

It was a conscious decision that the method “Verantwortungspartner” has first of all a one year perspective. They could reflect decide how to go on or not. There are three possibilities to go on after one year:

1<sup>st</sup> Finishing the project: no further activities, final presentation and documentation of the results
2<sup>nd</sup> Continuing one year: another one year period with eventually new objectives, topic and partners
3<sup>rd</sup> Sustainability: permanently financed office with manpower to support new projects and partnerships.

At the end of this phase there should be in each case a final event with hopefully high publicity. According to the planned go on the partners present the final results or they present successful projects and try to stimulate new partnerships, ideas and project for the next period.

3. Solution strategy to succeed in continuation – initial network, moderation, Online Portal

In our region Saarland the network decided at an early stage to continue the initiative “Verantwortungspartner” supported by a permanently financed office (3<sup>rd</sup> possibility, see chapter 2). During the implementation phase additional partners and regional networks participated in the projects and that was the reason why they expected a broad effect. Especially the topic “Youth, engineering and profession” promised to stimulate the interest of young people on engineering education to reduce the increasing problems in this area. Therefore they planned to develop the ideas and realised projects to “modules” of a future technical education. This will require a permanent cooperation of all relevant private and public groups. The regional enterprises – especially Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) – will play a particular role.

The following activities are the basic for the future work:
- The central network “Initiativkreis” has been established with the role of a decision board consisting of active partners
- A coordination office has been established
- A booster club supports the projects of the initiative
- Regional networks and projects contribute with moderation power for launched projects and partnerships
- The online portal “Verantwortungsportal Saarland” - an information and communication platform - has been developed to support networking in the future.

4. The Online Portal “Verantwortungsportal Saarland”

Networking means that decision preparation and making is mostly informal and information is spread to partners of the group. Moreover meetings of the decision board and network events are organized by changing participation. Therefore a good information and publication concept is extraordinary necessary to guarantee internal and external
communication transparency. The online portal “Verantwortungsportal Saarland” is one component of this communication concept.

The concept has to match the following tasks:

1st Public access area: Communication of the idea and public relations
   - Presentation of the idea, background information and successful project examples
   - News and events from the network partners
   - Public visibility of active partners → supports the CSR strategy of enterprises (marketing)
   - Invite persons to enter the network and create partnerships

2nd Internal area: professional working area for members and partners
   - Access to potential partners and partnerships → contact platform
   - Information about projects and ideas → information platform
   - Convenient search function for different target groups
   - “Requests” and “offers” for partnerships and projects specifically highlighted
   - Brain pool: Basis for additional ideas and a component to spread the initiative

The method “Verantwortungspartner” has an enterprise centred approach. We need very effective processes as it is not part of the core business of the involved enterprises; disturbance by SPAM is not accepted. So the following requirements have to be fulfilled:

- Fast Registration with minimum information
- Moderators unlock members, partnerships, inserted ideas and projects
- Basis profile information indicating the interests of the person are required before being unlocked
- Only serious offers and requests will be unlocked
- Cooperation contracts (min. 6 month) are planned before realizing a project
- The concept of members and partnerships

Picture 1: “Verantwortungsportal Saarland” – internal area, Tag Cloud (left orange) and “light function” (red rectangle)
The development of a commonly accepted concept based on the above mentioned requirements was very time-consuming; the concept had to match the different interests and ideas of the heterogeneous decision group. By the strategy of “rapid prototyping” a first prototype could be realized to test the planned functionality. Based on this prototype the aims of the involved partners – represented by the network - have been discussed with the following results:

The Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and the goal to attract as many partners as possible was the main aspect; solely marketing aspects had to be reduced. The network decided that presenting ideas and projects of the active partners is the most important aspect of the public online portal. In addition the entrance and all data inserted in the internal area are proved by the moderators before unlocked. The reason was that the internal area should only be used by persons really interested in a partnership to avoid “dead logins” and Spam.

A dynamic Tag Cloud allows to access projects and ideas according to the indicated target groups. The most frequently used target groups are visually highlighted (see picture 1).

The internal area supports in addition the following processes:
1st Edit ideas and support the succeeding processes until contracting a a project
2nd Edit partnership and support the succeeding process until contracting a project

A “light function” (gray = project not yet started, green = project on the run, red = project finished) presents a survey of the actual status of the projects (picture 1). You can actively express interest in an idea by pressing an “interest button” and the author will be informed.

The moderators play a very important rôle within the communication process. Beside unlocking information they are contact persons for launching projects and searching for suitable partners.

5. Disseminating strategy

The release of the online portal in March 2010 was a new starting point for the network to initiate projects and partnerships between enterprises, schools and preschool. Unfortunately it was not a fast-selling item but it supports the important individual address by the moderators that is really required. The online portal will continuously be published in all events of the network “Verantwortungspartner” and linked with the home pages of the partners. As a first result the number of members has tripled within the first 3 month. In spite of this fact we noticed that the time to build-up a specific network will always be underestimated. The project shows that initialising projects requires still a strong support by experienced moderators with regional knowledge.

Some projects have been successfully realized and have a potential to spread in the region. One of them was awarded by the Bertelsmann Foundation together with the online portal and we expect a pulling effect. The big score with many users is still missing. May be we have to implement interactivity as it is common in social networks. But we have seriously to think about the access hindrance of our concept: the restrictions at the login process, the unlocking process for ideas, projects and other information must be reconsidered. After one year of testing we will redesign the concept and implement a adapted communication concept.

References


