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Integration works both ways: what a new start asks of the work community

When someone starts in a new job or role, they need to find their place in a new work community without leaving behind the professional skills and experience they already have. The Mentoroinnin Polulla (Along the Mentoring Path) mentoring programme, developed in the project Employment and Competence Pathways in the Wellbeing Services County of North Ostrobothnia (Pohde), builds on this premise. It treats the integration of new and returning employees as a process that involves the whole work community.

Identity and participation

Acculturation research describes integration as keeping one's own identity and background while taking full part in the life of the new community. Compared with other ways of responding to a new cultural setting, integration has generally been the most favourable adaptation (Berry 1997).

In working life, the first of these is professional identity, the competence and experience a person brings with them. The second is taking full part in the work community they have joined. Understood this way, integration is not limited to people who have moved from another country. In the project, it also covers employees returning after a long absence, those whose work ability has changed and experienced professionals moving into new roles.

Integration depends on the work community

Integration is possible only when the community is open and inclusive towards diversity. It requires mutual accommodation, in which the newcomer adapts and the community is prepared to change its own practices as well (Berry, 1997).

In a workplace, that community is concrete: the colleagues on the shift, the mentor and the manager. Its openness shows in everyday situations, such as whether a newcomer feels able to ask for help or admit a mistake. This is the core of psychological safety, a shared belief within a team that such interpersonal risks are safe to take (Edmondson, 1999). Because the belief is shared, it is a property of the team as a whole rather than of the individual who has just joined it.

For culturally and linguistically diverse nurses, this climate is closely linked to how they experience their work. Acceptance and support from colleagues and managers are associated with greater job satisfaction, whereas low psychological safety reduces it (Yabal et al., 2026). Since acceptance comes from the existing staff, models that support integration should also develop the cultural competence of native-born nurses (Kamau et al., 2022).

When the competence a person brings has no room

For an internationally educated professional, competence gained elsewhere is part of their professional identity. If it goes unrecognised in the new workplace, the person may take part in the daily work of the unit while that identity is left aside, and integration remains incomplete.

An employee returning after a long absence or adapting to changed work ability faces a similar situation. The competence and experience gathered before the change remain part of who they are as professionals, and integration into the new situation requires room for that earlier identity as well as support in taking up a changed role. Recognising prior competence is therefore part of what the work community contributes to integration.

How the mentoring programme puts this into practice

This view of integration runs through the Mentoroinnin Polulla (Along the Mentoring Path) programme developed in the project. The programme is designed both for culturally and linguistically diverse employees and for employees in other transitions, and it gives a defined role to the mentee, the mentor and the manager.

The programme sees the mentor as a member of the community the mentee is joining, and the mentor's own openness affects which paths become available. For this reason, mentors also follow the development of their own cultural competence through self-assessments completed at the start and at the end of the programme.

The manager's part extends beyond the mentoring pair to building an inclusive and psychologically safe work community in which diversity is seen as a resource.

Support written into the workbooks

This support is carried largely by three workbooks, one each for the mentee, the mentor and the manager. They set out the questions, exercises and reflection tasks for each stage of the mentoring. The ability to provide support is written into the material itself and does not depend on whether a mentor already knows how to guide a reflective conversation. This makes the programme accessible to units without an established mentoring culture and to mentors taking on the role for the first time.

Structure is particularly helpful for reflection at work. Reflective skills develop through dialogue with more experienced colleagues and in settings where experiences can be discussed without blame, and those new to reflective practice gain from guidance on what it involves (Marshall et al., 2022). The workbooks offer this guidance through prepared questions for each meeting and through written reflection, which the mentee continues between meetings and the mentor after each one. Reflecting on what has gone well at work has also been found to reduce stress and improve health (Bono et al., 2013), and recognising one's own strengths is one of the themes the workbooks build on.

The workbooks also help build trust between mentor and mentee. They include questions on the mentee's uncertainty and sense of belonging, so that these can be discussed openly from the start. Relationships based on shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect foster psychological safety, which in turn allows people to learn from mistakes rather than conceal them (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009).

Mentors need support of their own to sustain the role. In regular meetings with the manager, the mentor can raise what has come up in the mentoring. The manager is guided in this by a workbook of their own. Mentoring can also benefit the mentors themselves: those who mentor report higher job satisfaction and organisational commitment than those who do not (Ghosh & Reio, 2013).

Bringing the two connections together

In this way, the programme supports both identity and participation. The workbooks help to make visible the competence and experience a person brings, while the roles of the mentor and the manager build the trust and psychological safety that full participation requires. The programme can be taken into use in any unit where someone is starting anew.

About the project

Employment and Competence Pathways in the Wellbeing Services County of North Ostrobothnia (Pohde) develops ways to recognise the prior competence of internationally educated professionals and people in work-life transitions, and to support their employment and integration in health and social care. The project is co-funded by the European Union through the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). It is carried out by Pohde, the University of Oulu, Oulu Vocational College (OSAO), Diaconia University of Applied Sciences (Diak) and Oulu University of Applied Sciences (Oamk).

Author: Tanja Graham, Project Researcher, University of Oulu

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