Introducing the Strawberry Discovery and Niche Process

Kristiina Annala
M.Sc. (Chem.Eng)
Turku, Finland
annala@wakkanet.fi

ABSTRACT

The Strawberry Discovery and Niche Process (SDNP) introduces a workbook, a new systematic method, a compact and cost-effective training process. The trainees are directed in a systematic process to make an inventory of their most valuable resources, including themselves, and plan for additional training or a career. On the basis of their discoveries, they generate: a plan for self-employment, plans directing their energies to projects, tele-work, and networks. Most of them also create their own products and services, compiling them into tentative business ideas and entrepreneurial plans. The name of the process is based on the ‘mind map’ of a strawberry plant that illustrates the process.

Keywords
Creative problem-solving, Emotional intelligence, Entrepreneurship, Self-employment, Tacit knowledge

Introduction

The human mind has much tacit knowledge, deep layers of a personality and an even deeper cultural heritage. As traditions fade by as new technologies, trends and products, and information displace the wisdom of the past, new anchors for personal and professional development are required.

In this paper, the Strawberry Discovery and Niche Process (SDNP) is introduced as a stepping stone for a personal transition phase, such as seeking employment, between jobs, starting-up, or finding a career. The SDNP process was designed and the copyright of the SDNP workbook is owned by Ms. Kristiina Annala, Turku, Finland. The SDNP was designed for the first telework trainees in the Turku University Telework Project, Finland in 1992. It has since been used for a total of 1104 trainees in 75 groups. The process is a compact training program, assisting a trainee to collect tacit knowledge and crystallize personal and other resources into plans for personal development, employment, and a career. As the plans are based on a solid knowledge of one’s own personality, they form a steady building ground for the future. In the pilot phase, SDNP has proved to be an efficient tool to anchor the uncertainties of a transition phase in the deep layers of one’s personality. The article presents the process, exemplifies some discoveries made and discusses findings and results during the pilot years 1992-2001.

The basic anchor in the storms of an on-going change is the identity of an individual and the wisdom accumulated over the years. Human beings have not changed that much. The same questions are asked by a new generation, as individuals grow up and mature. These recurring questions include the ever-present search for an identity, a livelihood, a niche of one’s own in the world. With modern computing and communications technology, mastering a large amount of information is possible. The SDNP makes a wealth of knowledge visible and provides an anchor for values and personality in times of change.

Discoveries

The roots of any employment - and of making a career - are the skills and talents of an individual, his or her personal resources. The human resources of an organization can be seen as the sum of individual talents and skills, multiplied by an energy input - the motivation and willingness to work toward a common goal, as ideas are brainstormed. This seems to be very basic to human nature: humans desire a social context (Annala, 2002).

The Strawberry Discovery and Niche Process is a training program of 6 - 8 days divided into 2 day seminars with a few weeks between them to allow for individual processing. SDNP provides a deep analysis of one's personality, talents, capacity, experience and values and how they are reflected in one's personal history. The objective is an explicit statement of a personality anchored in uniqueness, human rights and creativity, and able to communicate with other people, regardless of their background. The outcome of the training is generally a personal development plan, controlled and managed by the individual her/himself. The training program is aimed at people in transition: those between jobs, seeking first employment, or starting up a business.
The SDNP program includes several creative problem-solving steps, some of which have been modified from creative technical product development methods (Parrish, 1988). The group brainstorming sessions enhance creative problem-solving. During the sessions, the beginnings of a network starts to emerge, as group members identify similar interests, methods and goals.

The SDNP program is illustrated by a ‘mind map’ depicting a strawberry plant, where the root system represents the inventory of one’s personal resources and the parts above the ground represent the subsequent plans. The roots are the individuality of a person - and the soil is his or her personal history. The most interesting phase of the process is where the roots meet the leaves in a stem, combining a person’s individuality and opportunities in the outside world. The theories to map the stem can be found among the well established fields of communication and marketing, which combine individual psychology and societal and economic processes in a function of human behaviour, respectively. Thus, the stem designates a transfer of one discipline of research to another - a growth process. It can also be seen as a transition from the inner world to the outer, from an individual to a social process.

The SDNP training alternates between individual and group sessions. In a computer class, a trainee makes an inventory of individual resources in a straightforward step-by-step process. In an adult, the education, experience and life long learning are taken into account. In a young person, the identity is based on weaker signs, which, however, are easily recognisable, too.

The process helps to specify a person’s individuality. For many, the experience results in fresh discoveries. The consequent plans become instructions to guide individuals. While making plans for the future, a control is activated and eventually internalized. Surprisingly, as this process evolves there is often a definite change to engage more creative powers of the human mind. Self-employment plans are the primary outcome for a great majority of trainees; many have taken their creativity even further into expressions in various forms of arts. This author started the SDNP process in 1992 and found that my technical creativity opened up into a spring of creative writing, including singing and a book of poems (Annala, 2001).

In the initial two-day seminar, a very basic self-discovery process takes place. Individuals provide explicit answers to these questions: (a) Who am I? (b) What are my interests and values? (c) What kind of goals can I set myself on the solid foundation of a well defined identity? Skills vital for the expression of identity, self-esteem and employment are mapped out in a computer-based session. The computing involves an Excel workbook, which is also used as an introduction to information technology.

The following seminars are a systematic process based on the initial discoveries, as the seeds start to take root. Built on a solid rock of a person’s identity, the consequential plans become a personal development program for life-long learning and an entrepreneurial plan.

The program can also be used as an inventory of the human resources in an organisation. One strawberry plant illustrates an individual, several plants together is a group, a team or a department - and the sum of their capacity and resources can be evaluated. Interesting and effective teams come together, as different skills are combined for a specific task.

The nature of the SDNP as an activator of emotional and creative powers guarantees that underlying problems - be they personal, organisational or in human relations - are brought out to be addressed, streamlining the capacity of a team, as underlying problems are revealed and addressed. If desirable, the process can also be used to map personal problem areas, such as suppressed traumas. But to do that, the trainer needs to be an experienced therapist and the group small.

The behavior of the groups in a computer class vary widely. One group sits tightly hunched over their computers and are startled by the trainer’s call for a brainstorming session, another stretch their necks and keep up a lively discussion over the monitors while working on their individual charts.

The common brainstorming sessions ensure that all the talents present are brought forth. They become common property, since many trainees share them - and thus enable the trainees to network on the common grounds of having learned to know each other. The energy of the brainstorming is often carried to the evening of the training day - and the group is delighted to evaluate the outcome of a trainee’s flow the next morning. Peer consulting is often offered in the form of an art or product exhibition, where everybody brings samples from their portfolios and products or invention prototypes.
Outcomes

My statistics of the SDNP trainees show that a plan for a small business is drawn up by:

- 70.0% of the adult trainees,
- 92.3% of the university students at the final stages of their studies,
- 8% of the 17-year-old high school seniors.

The roots of tomorrow lie deeply in the soil of a personal history. I was recently told by a psychologist, one of the foremost experts on life-long learning in Finland (K. Mikkelä, personal communication, 12 July 2001), that “history starts with the individual.” We need to be actively making our own history and defend our own values. If not, the void is filled from the outside by somebody else. Creativity, talents and skills, learning, culture, education and experience are components in the soil from which the products and services sprout, bearing fruit in the form of personal economy, new insights, new products or projects, and networking.

It is a long process, indeed, from a word or a plan to an action and an outcome, from an idea or an innovation to profits, from a seed to fruit and harvesting time, from basic research to products in a long product development process, from an idea to a business plan and a successful entrepreneurship. Long and tedious hours, a major investment. Sowing the seeds, watering, weeding and monitoring the growth will ensure a harvest, when the time comes. Without the sowing, weeds take over the fertile land and crops are small, if any. Even after nearly 10 years, it is still too early to assess long-lasting effects of the SDNP process.

Discussion

Since the beginnings of entrepreneurship are clearly divided between two or more disciplines of research - psychology, education, business, marketing, innovation - there are gaps in the process. Mapping the continuous process over the borders is like building a bridge over a gorge. The most important resource in a start-up - the entrepreneur - is in most programs not given proper attention or asked to provide an inventory of personal resources. This phase belongs clearly in the field of psychology, and neglecting it leads to a much lower percentage of entrepreneurs, especially in Europe, than healthy national economies require.

Research suggests that the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the ‘starter motor’ of a national economy and provide an important source from which income and welfare flow both at the personal and the national level. SMEs lead the way in reinvigorating an economy. Because SMEs are typically flexible, small, quick to find new opportunities and change direction, if necessary, they are well suited to respond to the demands of the marketplace.

The pilot phase of the SDNP produced this conclusion: there is a vast untapped potential both in organisations and in small and medium-sized enterprises. In short, the pilot phase confirmed what research suggests about the value of SMEs. Nations should better support SMEs in order to remain competitive.

With modern computing, many of the administrative tasks in businesses, organisations and society can be automated. This provides a broad market for product development and can release many more people to do more productive work. With modern information and communication tools, it is possible to make major changes in economical processes and streamline administrative tasks. One approach is to explore structural changes - often legislative - to match the modern tools available. The health of any national economy can be measured by the number of SMEs. They are the life pulse of economical activity, a local starter motor in the machinery of global economy.

However, markets still seem to develop in the opposite direction: towards larger units, less creativity or quality, crystallizing in the global stock market (N. C. Parrish, personal communication, 1990). If part of the flow of funds is not returned in the form of a ‘nurturing rain’ to the beginnings of the flow, the spring of creativity dies as the reservoirs are used up, and, consequently, the economy withers. There is no global market unless the local market thrives. An analogical process is easy to find. In a healthy industrial process, as the development processes of new products are given proper attention, the enterprise continues to prosper. In general, companies develop through this ongoing growth and renewal process.

At the societal level, the roots of an economic activity are in the ‘economy of love’ (Henderson, 1996). This means that a society should redefine the ‘costs’ of bringing up children, education, innovation, environment and health care as long-term investments. They are investments for the future, vital to the profit producing functions.
of the society (Annala, 2002). The neglect of creative and social aspects in economic planning results in a cost that should be recognized and avoided when possible.

Development processes are comparable to invention processes, and, as such, are very familiar in economic theories - they represent the beginnings of the product life cycle. A lot of problem solving is required early in product development in order to make the product available and profitable. Gaps and uncertainties in development processes can result in a low and unhealthy percentage of entrepreneurs.

The SDNP attempts to bring together a trainee's past - including personal resources, opportunities, experience, plans, and education - in order to prepare for a brighter future. The SDNP often leads to projects or a sequence of projects. These projects may seem random at first, but when an individual's interests and values are seen as the thread that ties them together, they become more like a life's work.

Conclusion: The Rationale of the Creative

The SDNP is a process bridging gorges between the inner world of an individual and the outer world of economy, or the disciplines of psychology, communication and economics. It joins together the basics of an inventory of personal resources - revealing tacit knowledge in a chart which can be interpreted by the trainee him/herself - communication and the basic concepts of marketing, finding one's own niche. With the tools of modern information technology, the process is systematic and simple to follow - but not easy, mind you! Thus the path to employment, even self-employment, is shortened with less fear of getting wet or being swept away by the flood in the river in the gorge (finding employment, or the beginnings of a start-up and the death valley of a new SME). The process is controlled by the trainee, counselled and supported by the training group and the trainer. The outcome of the process is also used as a control signal and a guide (Annala, 1978).

Modern research in various fields, such as creative functions of the brain, are producing results which will make several major changes in the cultures of the world. Now it is possible to defend a place for the following generations, encourage creativity, and provide a solid groundwork for human life.

Random processes tend to produce random results; purely rational processes, however, may produce devastating results. We need to consciously include the emotional energy in the processes. The rationale behind a systemic and systematic approach of matching an individual’s talents and work is evident: energy flows freely, motivation is high and produces a flow (Csikszentmihályi, 1990). In such a process, work is not just work but also fun, and may even remove unnecessary barriers to fulfillment. This is where the rationale of the creative lies: a new beginning, a fresh start for something better.

The creative human mind finds solutions easily. Empowerment programs bring forth emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998), and remove the limitations of the rational mind. The efficient information processing and networking tools are there. What we need now is the wisdom and emotional intelligence to use these tools to address fundamental problems. It requires co-operation across boundaries, since it is only in efficient communication processes where satisfactory solutions can be found. The motto of the Strawberry Discovery and Niche process reads: “The basic unit of human activity is a group.”

After working with the SDNP for 10 years in both training and research, it is only possible to draw a tentative conclusion that processes oriented towards creativity will be beneficial and to invite more people to use and join SDNP. People can build a different world where abuse, violence, war and prostitution are much less frequent and less a part of everyday society.

References


