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FOSTERING TALENT FOR TWENTE

Author:

Demitriana Minassian MSc

FEST Lead & Research Engineer
Fraunhofer Project Center
at the University of Twente



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Three years ago, an idea of having a team of students connected to the Fraunhofer Project Center at the University of Twente (FPC@UT) came to life. The intention was to interact with these students early in their studies, preparing them for their professional future. The team was named FEST (FPC Expertise Student Team) and it was envisaged that it would provide students from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds and varying fields of study, with a nurturing environment, encouraging skills growth and workplace experience. Support and guidance from FPC@UT would always be on hand to foster the growth and professionalism of these young cohorts.

FEST was not only created for the benefit of students; the concept was much more far-reaching. FPC@UT believed that industry and educators would also be big winners. The revolutionary project hoped to create an integrated community between students, industry and academia, bridging the gaps between interested parties whilst creating opportunities for dialogue and growth for all. It is envisaged that relationships formed through FEST would create life-long learning opportunities and knowledge-sharing for all participants.

A Collaborative Approach

FEST students work with participating companies, applying the theories they have learned at University to real-world challenges. They are able to study current methodologies, technologies and practices in the workplace, supplementing their theoretical learning with practical applications. This provides a unique vantage point, whereby students can observe the way companies currently function and pinpoint possible areas for improvement and/or innovation. An added benefit to this collaborative approach is the retention of potential young talented workforce in the region. Having already built a solid working relationship with a locally-based potential employer, gaining employment locally is made much easier. The companies also benefit from the unique approach FEST students bring to the workplace. Students have few pre-conceived ideas about how things should be or have always been. Fresh from studying state-of-the-art industrial practices at University, students are well-placed to spot opportunities for innovation and improvement that may be of immense benefit to participating companies.

Smarter Outcomes

Through this collaboration, we aim to create an upward spiral of knowledge and positive action. FEST students inject new knowledge, acquired at University, into participating companies, helping them develop. The companies, in turn, share their years-long experience with the student, preparing knowledgeable, industry-prepared students/workers for seamless entry into the workplace. Educational institutions feature on the continuum, as they gain an increase in practical knowledge, shared by the FEST student, which is then passed on to the next batch of students, thus continuing to provide state-of-the-art education which these future students will share with their employers.

Future-Proofing Against Inevitable Change

Automation, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and smart, connected machines are dramatically altering our workforces and ushering in the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'. Workers are now required to quickly adapt to rapidly changing technologies and methods. To keep pace, companies and organizations need to identify and cultivate behavioural competencies that allow personnel to master new technologies, acclimate to new ways of working and thrive in their new environment.

The downside is that one does not need to look far to find headlines announcing the demise of entire occupations due to technological takeover. Losses of this type are not new, but have usually occurred over extended periods of time, where adjustments to workforces can be slowly and methodically implemented. In the 21st century however, the speed with which massive change occurs is breath-taking. In order that our communities continue to move forward, it is imperative that immediate action is taken to future-proof workforces. This is far more complex than it seems. Certainly, skill-mapping, continuous training, social learning and agile tech learning have their place in alleviating this worrying scenario, but their results may prove insufficient to the massive task ahead of us all.

Building Collaborative Alliances

It is anticipated that student organisations like FEST herald a new age of mutually beneficial alliances between educational institutions and industry. The hope is that learning institutions like the University of Twente and institutions such as the Fraunhofer Project Center can continue to forge strong relationships with industry leaders, enabling more innovative programmes across a wide range of industries throughout the region. This offers a tantalizing glimpse of a future of co-operation and inventiveness where academia learns from industry and vice versa. Academia's strengths in abstract problem-solving and intellectual development should marry well with industry's need for increasingly competitive work practises and highly specialised and targeted solutions.

Innovative and imaginative solutions like FEST are certainly taking steps in the right direction, helping to anticipate the changing needs of industry and assisting in future-proofing workforces before they become redundant. Education will play a vital role in ensuring workforces are properly prepared for foreseeable changes and agile enough to respond to unforeseeable ones. Student organisations like FEST, that narrow the existing divide between academia and industry, ensure that industries and workforces are better prepared for a rapidly changing world. They are laying the groundwork for a more efficient, more affluent society in the future.

