

Lifelong learning works both ways

Trainees' perspective on Kadaster

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SUMMARY

As a (public) organisation, it can be a challenge to keep up with the rapidly evolving society. It is imperative to evolve along with the technological, scientific and social changes. This description fits the concept of lifelong learning, which focuses on continuous development including addressing the adaptation to the societal demands. Part of lifelong learning is also about bridging the gap between seasoned employees and employees who are learning on the job. What if you make use of the skills, experiences and fresh perspectives of the young starters, for instance trainees, for the further development of the organisation and its employees. Lifelong learning works both ways. This allows both the trainee and the organisation to benefit from this collaboration. However, both parties should be aware that giving constant attention and effort is necessary; it doesn't happen by itself. Although not all opportunities are being exploited, experience shows that great strides have been made.

Hiring young and with diverse backgrounds, for example through a traineeship programme, is one way to implement lifelong learning because of their state-of-the-art knowledge, various backgrounds, and a fresh perspective.

From a trainees' perspective, this article discusses the benefits of a diverse organisation, how trainees can be optimally used, how to attract and bind young and diverse people, and how this contributes to lifelong learning. In addition, personal experiences are being shared and the lessons learned from the Netherlands' Cadastre, Land Registry and Mapping Agency (in short Kadaster) is presented. Lastly, the paper provides guidance for an organisation on how to actively participate in lifelong learning through the interaction between seasoned employees and young starters.

Lifelong learning works both ways

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1. INTRODUCTION

Why would you hire young and diverse people in your organisation, when you can attract experienced professionals at the same time? – We have to invest too much in this inexperienced group, it is better to spend a little more for professionals so that we have exactly what we need. This way of thinking is common to both sides of the question. Young starters wonder what they can add to an organisation and the organisation itself does not always see the benefits of young and diverse people. There are many benefits of hiring a diverse group of starters. One of these benefits is the contribution to lifelong learning of an organisation, which addresses the gap between seasoned employees and starters.

In reference to the definition used in the ‘FIG statement on ensuring diversity and inclusion’ from 2021, diversity is in our article defined in the following way: ‘to recognize that each of us is different and that it is important to value and respect individual differences such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, background, education, working and thinking styles, as well as religious background, sexual orientation, ability and technical skills’.

Since October 2021 we, the authors, are working at The Netherlands’ Cadastre, Land Registry and Mapping Agency – in short Kadaster – as trainees. Kadaster started its traineeship in 2012, after which every two or three years a new trainee group was hired. We are, together with three other trainee, currently part of the 5th class of trainees. The traineeship programme is for starters with an academic degree. Over the next two years, we will fulfil three individual assignments and a joint assignment with the 3 other trainees. From our perspective as a trainee, this article discusses the benefits of a diverse organisation, how they can be optimally used, how to attract and bind young and diverse people, and how this contributes to lifelong learning. In addition, personal experiences are being shared and lessons learned from Kadaster are presented.



The 5th class of Kadaster trainees (with Rindert on the front left side and Eeke in the middle on the right side)

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2. REJUVINATION IN ORGANISATION

It is obvious to state that an organisation with a diverse workforce is more innovative and creative, and also better at solving problems. Many studies examined the correlation between the diversity within an organisation and the quality of performance. This showed that the higher the diversity rate, the better the health of an organisation is in several respects. A diverse group of employees provides different perspectives, better responding to the needs of society and higher employee satisfaction. First, we focus on age diversity within organisations. Because why would you want to hire young employees in your organisation?

Starters on the labour market are often seen as inexperienced employees in whom an organisation has to invest substantially to give back. It is not without reason that there are only a few starter positions in Kadaster's field of work. In addition, existing vacancies often require a minimum number of years of experience to be effective. However, the added value of hiring young and diverse employees is underestimated. In fact, hiring this group of people in an organisation has many advantages.

3. ADVANTAGES OF YOUNG EMPLOYEES

Of course, there are basic advantages of young employees: they are cheaper, good for the profile as employer (if you want to attract a young target group), they have a high ambition to learn and develop themselves and let's not forget that recent graduates have acquired state-of-the-art knowledge which can be extremely useful in an organisation. However, it would not do justice to only mention these basic advantages of hiring young and diverse employees. From our experiences at Kadaster, three reasons emerge for hiring this group: a fresh perspective, a different outlook on life and the eagerness to have a social impact are characteristics that distinguish young employees.

Seasoned employees generally become more comfortable within their organisation or team over the years; the hierarchical relationships are known because they have created their own culture. The downside is that this team will often develop the same perspective on work. Young employees can play an important role in tackling this organisational gaze because they are not yet ingrained in certain routines and ways of thinking within the organisation. Our simplistic view, because we have little understanding of substantive issues, our innovative and sometimes critical attitude offers a fresh perspective on certain issues that can help to break out of the existing way of thinking. Simply asking the question: "Why do you do the things the way that you do?" can help to put a light on certain matters that were never doubted or questioned before.

Another advantage of young employees is that they grew up in a different context with different resources. They stand closer to the latest trends in society, which they can anticipate better than the older generations, such as hybrid working. We also see at Kadaster that young employees have the urge to be socially involved and have a different view of the work-life balance than the traditional way.

Finally, Kadaster also recognises that young employees have a high ambition to learn and develop themselves. Open-mindedness is a term often mentioned here. Remember Pippi Longstocking's famous statement: "I have never tried that before, so I think I should definitely be able to do that".

4. MUTUAL LEARNING

Hiring young employees is beneficial for the more seasoned employees within the organisation. It offers opportunities for mutual learning where both starters and seasoned employees learn from each other. The experience of existing employees and the new perspective of the starters is shared. The concept of mutual learning derives from a multi-generational perspective which focuses on the interaction between different generations within an organisation.

Mutual learning benefits an organisation by talent management, social equity and diversity, bridging technology gaps, and awareness of trends and customers. Of course, this is easier said than done. An organisation must embrace a lifelong learning culture in which personal and professional development is embedded. In addition, a two-way learning environment is needed at all levels, which means that the most experienced professionals must be willing to actively develop themselves. Finally, the organisation must have the capacity and time to invest in this process.

Three examples of activities that can foster interaction between new and seasoned employees are discussed here.

First, hiring young employees can provide a platform for seasoned employees to take on the role of mentor. This mentorship contributes to the personal development of these employees, which helps them to grow as a professional. Second, the traditional mentorship described above can be changed into the concept of reverse mentoring. Reverse mentoring differs from traditional mentoring in that the junior becomes the mentor and the senior becomes the mentee. However, knowledge is still transferred in both directions. Benefits for the mentor can be seen in organisational knowledge, personal learning and increasing exposure within the organisation. In this role, the mentee benefits from a new perspective, relational learning, and new knowledge and skills. Third, an organisation can use the peer coaching tool to help young and seasoned employees interact with each other. In a small diverse group, professionals discuss certain topics and share knowledge to help each other with their challenges.

5. TRAINEESHIP

One way to take full advantage of the benefits of young workers is to install a traineeship programme. Traineeships are becoming increasingly popular. We perceive a traineeship as a full-fledged starters position with room to try different functions within the organisation. In addition, it focuses, more than non-trainee positions, on both the personal and professional development of the trainee. Naturally, the advantages of young and diverse employees also apply to the trainees. A traineeship also provides additional long-term benefits for the organisation. Because trainees are allowed to discover the organisation, they build up a broad network and gain experience and knowledge about the organisation.

The traineeship's emphasis on personal development is also beneficial to the organisation as the development programme helps to develop the trainee in various positions, such as team leader, consultant, and project manager. In our personal experience, the traineeship at Kadaster offers us the space and the possibility (with e.g. coaching) to discover which tasks gives us energy and which do not.

In addition, an association for and of young employees can help to retain young employees. At Kadaster there is such an association, called Jong Kadaster. The aim of Jong Kadaster is to bring young land registry employees into contact with each other and develop their skills. By sharing experiences, young employees get to know a broad picture of the organisation and gain more insight into the career opportunities within the organisation. As an organisation, you also show your support and emphasise the importance of self-development by making time and money available for this association.

Lastly, consider people who leave as an opportunity. This is an alternative perspective, but thinking in networks can help to see opportunities in employees leaving your organisation. Because if you have treated them well, they become ambassadors for your organisation or they return with new knowledge and experiences.

A traineeship is also beneficial for the trainees themselves. Trainees become familiar with the different departments and positions in an organisation. This offers the opportunity to find a position within or outside the organisation which you enjoy, where you feel comfortable and in which you want to develop further.

Moreover, because trainees are new to the organisation, we are often seen as more objective. This is shown in practice based on personal example. This makes people more likely to open up to us and share their critical opinions, feelings and experiences because we are not in a hierarchical relationship. This offers opportunities for us to link the critical signals to higher management. In conclusion, this allows us to constitute an integrated advice that better fits the needs of the organisation.

6. TRAINEE PROGRAMME OF KADASTER: SELECTING, RECRUITING AND RETAINING YOUNG AND DIVERSE EMPLOYEES

To ensure and benefit from a young and diverse group of trainees, Kadaster *selects* trainees with specific criteria. The goal of the traineeship has been determined in consultation with the organisation; “What does Kadaster want the trainees to contribute to the organisation?”. It is important to select trainees based on their characteristics. Moreover, a trainee group should consist of trainees with a diverse (study) background. The previously mentioned FIG Statement on Diversity and Inclusion for example states ‘proactively increase diversity within the profession by opting to choose from a bigger talent pool’. We concur with this point of view. An organisation should not focus on specific study backgrounds but rather on the qualities of a person and the trainee group.

The candidates are carefully selected based on an assessment form. This assessment form is subdivided into 'requirements' and 'potential'. The underlying characteristics depend on the purpose of the traineeship within an organisation. It can be determined based on the advantages of young and diverse employees, such as the flexibility of a trainee, the development ambition, and networking capacity. In doing this, it gives a good reflection of the possibilities of both the trainee as an individual and the trainees as a group. In addition, Kadaster pays special attention not only to age diversity but also to the diversity of backgrounds. Both in the field of study backgrounds and cultural backgrounds. To achieve this, an agency that specialises in diversity can for instance be used in the application process.

In *recruiting* trainees, it is important to ask and answer the question; “How can an organisation appeal to this young and diverse group?”. However, there is no standard answer to this question. From personal experience, it is important to be given the space to colour outside the lines and to be able to develop yourself.

Kadaster offers us this space because of the safe and open environment. This environment is characterised by the acceptance of different perspectives and the room to make mistakes and learn from them. In this traineeship, we learned to have confidence in ourselves and not to be afraid to make mistakes. A personal example that endorses this was the organisation of a participatory research. One of the authors had little to no experience in leading this kind of research. However, his supervisor encouraged him to ‘just do it’ and emphasised that he would only learn from this experience.

Lastly, the image of an organisation is important in attracting a young and diverse group. Kadaster isn’t well-known among this group and it has an old-fashioned image. When new employees start their job, they are, like us, often surprised at what the organisation has to offer. In particular, they are amazed about the level of innovation, the (development) possibilities within the organisation and the social and economic importance of Kadaster. Kadaster invests heavily in projecting this image. For example, Kadaster pays attention to its image in external communications and campaigns. In addition, the organisation has hired a campus recruiter who makes contact with, for example, student associations. However, there are still opportunities for Kadaster to project its image. These opportunities will be discussed in the last section of this article (future policy).

Once an organisation have appealed to this young and diverse group it should also pay attention to *retain* them. A key feature to retaining young employees is to ensure there are enough entry-level positions. This may sound obvious but it is not (yet) the case in many organisations. Organisations will have to focus more on the qualities and skills of a person than on their age and years of experience.

At Kadaster we had to experiment and evaluate. Moreover, we are still learning and adapting to new circumstances, developments and needs. This is discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs.

7. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TRAINEESHIPS

During each traineeship, there is a continuous evaluation of the traineeship itself. Based on the needs and experiences of the trainees, the programme can be adjusted. It is important to customise the traineeship according to the needs of the individual trainees and the group dynamics. New circumstances also require a different approach and design. For instance, because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, we could at the beginning of the traineeship not often meet physically which affected the team spirit. The team spirit is important for, among other things, helping each other with personal development. Hence, there is extra team-building training added to the trainee program to address this. Lessons are also drawn from the evaluation for the next traineeship. Many of these lessons are practical in nature, such as how to fill in the introduction weeks with the other trainees and Kadaster, how to choose the first assignment, and how to fill in the role of the coach.

It is important to prepare the organisation for the instalment of a traineeship, e.g. what they can expect from trainees. However, this awareness has to grow within the organisation. Hiring trainees and placing them in the organisation can metaphorically be seen as an act of blowing a dandelion. The trainees are distributed in the organisation and their qualities and ideas are presented to a wider audience. Like a dandelion, you don't know the final destination of the trainees and their impact but you know that a seed is planted that can start to grow.

Kadaster learned that it is important to start small and give the organisation time to get familiar with the concept of trainees. We understood from the first batch of trainees that there was a wait-and-see attitude from colleagues towards the trainees. The trainees were often mistaken for students who were still studying, rather than graduated professionals. After the successes of the first trainees in the organisation which showed their qualities and skills, more and more colleagues started to see their added value.

8. FUTURE POLICY

As discussed in the article, Kadaster implemented a lot of activities to select, recruit and retain young and diverse employees. However, we also see several opportunities for Kadaster and other organisations to utilise this group even more. One of these opportunities is to set up a buddy programme. For example, a buddy program can be used to soften the outflow of employees. Because it is known which employees will soon be retiring, an organisation can respond by linking these people to starters so that they learn from their experience. As a result, knowledge and skills are transferred to the starter and it is easier to follow up on the position in the future. However, a buddy programme does not only have to apply to retirees, such a program can also consist of starters and other seasoned employees in the organisation. It is then important to ensure that it does not become a top-down relationship (from experienced employee to starter), but rather an equal collaboration in which the qualities of both people are used.

Another opportunity for organisations is the creation of more entry-level jobs. As stated throughout the article, it is important as an organisation to allow young and diverse employees to join your organisation. As discussed, setting up a traineeship programme can help to attract young and diverse starters. In addition to the general internship that we have discussed, there is also an opportunity for an organisation to set up specific traineeships. Kadaster has started offering a tailor-made traineeship for status holders. This means that the training is offered under specialist supervision. This expresses the concept of mutual learning because the status holder can, for example, improve their Dutch, while the organisation gains insight and learns to look at certain issues in a different way, such as the background of the status holder and their reflection in society. In addition, it is also possible to set up vocationally-oriented traineeships because these are difficult to attract due to the current tightness in the labour market. Such as the ICT traineeship or traineeships for other educational degrees.

During these traineeships, it is important to continue to evaluate. It can be assumed that the more traineeships there have been, the better the traineeships will be. Broadly speaking, this is true, but a traineeship is about customisation: each trainee and training group has specific needs. So continue to evaluate during each internship.

As every traineeship is different, evaluation contributes to a better acceptance in the organisation. For example, how can this batch of trainees be placed and promoted in the organisation? It is important to create an understanding and open environment for such programmes, whether it is a traineeship, mentorship or buddy programme. The dandelion metaphor is one way to prepare the organisation. Moreover, another possibility is to proactively engage with the employees in the organisation: organise discussions and enter into dialogue with each other about diversity.



An iftar evening for Kadaster employees: in dialogue with and getting to know each other.

9. CLOSING WORD

From our perspective as a trainee and based on our experiences at Kadaster, this article discussed the importance of investing in young and diverse employees, how to attract and retain this group, and how this contributes to the lifelong learning of an organisation. Young and diverse employees have a fresh perspective, a great eagerness to learn and a different outlook on life.

There are various possibilities and opportunities for organisations to get the most out of this group, such as setting up a traineeship and/or a mentorship programme. However, it is important to understand that the organisation must be given time to open up to these developments: see the dandelion metaphor.

To return to the question posed at the beginning: “Why hire young and diverse people in your organisation when you can attract experienced professionals at the same time?”. Ultimately, it is a win-win situation for both the organisation and the individual because this group contributes in the broadest sense of the word to both mutual and lifelong learning. To achieve this, an organisation needs to continuously experiment, evaluate and learn their life long.

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