

Throwing our nets in network waters

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My journey into networking began in the 1990s. I got acquainted with companies' networks theoretically, only scratching the empirical surface. Back in the day, when writing my master's thesis, I did not yet know that networks would be an essential part of my whole future working career. Now, more than 20 years later, I do not go back to the theories so often, but I am involved in creating networking practices every day.

I work at Kemin Digipolis Oy. Digipolis is a development company and technology centre owned mainly by the City of Kemi, other municipalities in the region and the University of Oulu Scholarship Foundation. As a development company and technology centre of 50 companies, Digipolis operates in the same campus area as Lapland University of Applied Sciences and Lappia Vocational College.

At the moment, besides producing services for companies, Digipolis Oy focuses on the industrial service business programme and the development of new wood construction. The industrial programme has continued with different themes since 2004. At the moment, Digipolis is a national leader in the wide field of bioeconomy and the circular economy.

The technology centre and the campus area can be thought of as a collection of organisations at the hub of networks. Development companies are often described as hubs of a network in their own right as well. Networks and hubs are not the purpose of the operations, but they reflect the development operating model very well. The purpose of a development company is to promote the creation of new business and the growth of existing business in its own operating area.

The resources of development companies, such as Digipolis, are usually scarce. The needs of the corporate customers, on the other hand, may be quite diverse and challenging. At the

same time, the public owner may assign the development company very extensive tasks relating to the development of a particular field or the strengthening of the vitality of a municipality, for example. This whole complex of development is a great challenge. A means that has proved effective – possibly the only means to overcome the challenge – is to utilise networks.

The network of Digipolis Oy is multilayered and in no way homogeneous. It is a living, ever-changing multidimensional social network formed by people. Networks are often described as inter-organisational, but communication is always the responsibility of people. The network of Digipolis includes nearly a thousand organisations, i.e. several thousand people. The ten-person development company team cannot communicate with everybody at the same time. Therefore, connections and connection activities are formed in parts of the network according to the situation and need. Usually, knowledge moves in the network, most often without any specific compensation. The aim is to turn the greatest challenges and needs into projects and get the necessary additional resources from EU programmes, for example.

Although the network of Digipolis is extensive and multidimensional, its core is formed by a few organisations. The closest collaborator is Lapland University of Applied Sciences, School of Industry and Natural Resources. The networks of Lapland University of Applied Sciences and Digipolis complement each other well. The intensity of collaboration varies each year for several reasons. Sometimes the development clients include the same companies, and sometimes a particular field and the related competence are promoted in collaboration. At the moment, this is the case with the industrial circular economy. In this field, the collaboration includes research and development projects, preparation of a degree programme, direct assignments from companies, needs and development analyses for companies as well as developing cluster activities and the preparedness for internationalisation.

The world of networking and the operating models to be drawn from it are so absorbing that you can get caught up in them. In that case, there is a risk that networking will be done for the networks themselves. Contents and the desired effectiveness may be forgotten. Therefore, networks and network operating models are a bad master but a fantastically cost-effective servant.

