Artificial intelligence requires systemic change – how ready are we?

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Artificial intelligence is discussed in the context of healthcare and social welfare services with the same tone and enthusiasm as digitalisation more than a decade ago: as a solution to nearly all challenges. Expectations of higher service productivity, enhanced quality and customer experience, better decision-making and reduced workload sound familiar. Artificial intelligence promises a lot, and it will play a role in the healthcare and social welfare services of the future. Few people question its potential.

The debate on artificial intelligence is largely a debate between AI experts, and there is much less focus on organisations' everyday experiences and views. This is unfortunate because it is not only a question of which AI solutions we use but also of the strategic debate about artificial intelligence and what is required of us as organisations when we are using it. And above all: how prepared we are to utilise artificial intelligence?

Many organisations, including those operating in the healthcare and social welfare sector, have made the same mistake during digitalisation: they have primarily considered the new technology as a separate solution or an extra component, attached it to everyday life and expected productivity benefits to appear. After a while, it has been realised that the technology did not bring much change because structures and processes as well as issues derived from the division of responsibilities were ignored, and digitalisation was not properly managed. As organisations struggled with path dependency, the technology may have stuck on its own path alongside old operating methods or become a shadow process. We cannot afford to make the same mistake with artificial intelligence, especially as we are facing such enormous pressures on public finances. However, if artificial intelligence is attached to functions with great expectations but in a mechanical manner and without a systemic approach, the risk of failure exists.

I would therefore like to highlight the Organization Development (OD) approach, which evolved in the 1950s. OD was created at a time when organisations grew rapidly and became more complex. It was difficult for them to keep up with the growth, and it was realised that simple solutions, existing models and development methods no longer worked. In that situation, a new way of understanding and managing organisations was needed. At the time, OD, which is based on system-theoretical debate and combines teachings of psychology, social sciences and management sciences, offered a new approach to the renewal and development of organisations.

We are also operating in an environment where technology and, to an increasing extent, artificial intelligence may be changing and challenging organisations faster and more strongly than ever before. Although OD is a product of a different era and world, in all its simplicity, it provides a functional framework to understand and manage changes brought about by technology. The message contained in OD is quite clear: An organisation's technical and social system forms an integral, interdependent package, which means that the technical system cannot be developed independently of people, the organisation's culture and management. When we start using artificial intelligence, it inevitably also means a change in other parts and systems of the organisation: in interactive relationships, service processes, expertise, information flow, decision-making methods, responsibilities and division of labour.

For example, we can use algorithms to produce highly accurate forecasts of future service needs. However, ultimately, the utilisation of these forecasts and the achievement of change depend on whether the information produced with algorithms can be interpreted, whether the information produced with algorithms is trusted in decision-making, and whether the organisation's operating processes are functioning properly to ensure that the information produced with algorithms ends up in the right arenas for use. Automated entries in healthcare, which change the construction of information in care work, are another example. As an activity, this requires seamless cooperation between professionals and artificial intelligence.

In short, OD thinking is based on first identifying the key challenges that artificial intelligence can and is expected to solve. Without a clear definition of the problem, artificial intelligence can easily remain an experiment that fails to take root or produce

the expected benefits. Secondly, developing the use of artificial intelligence should be inclusive and iterative and enable learning. Experiments should be carried out together, impacts should be assessed and, if necessary, the direction should be corrected. On this path, the organisation's structures, processes and artificial intelligence are tailored to work together in a seamless manner. Ultimately, it is always a question of cultural change, and our organisational culture determines whether artificial intelligence is adopted as a natural part of the activities.

Artificial intelligence is not just another helper but should become part of the structures, processes and roles. This is why its introduction is essentially a highly systematic organisational development process and not a technical project. Artificial intelligence should not be used to get quick wins. The crucial question is how systematically and comprehensively we can use new technologies to overhaul our organisation. If we succeed in that, we will be able to free healthcare and social welfare resources for human wellbeing, which lies at the core of these services.