Social innovation skills: what are they?

Addressing the grand challenges of the future is impossible without widened participation in social innovation. If so, it makes a great deal of sense to consciously nurture the skill sets that enable successful social innovation by diverse individuals and teams. However, what exactly are these skills?

Social innovation skills – unchartered waters

Surprising as it is, social innovation skills have hitherto been defined and investigated only to a limited extent. Indeed, relevant research has largely focused on commercially driven innovation or social entrepreneurship.

In terms of business innovation, a major study of 3,500 executives has argued for five particular skills: associating, observing, questioning, experimenting and networking, a set dubbed as 'the innovator's DNA'. In everyday innovation contexts, openness to ideas, original problem solving abilities and motivation are the top three characteristics for innovative working. Regarding key attitudes and skills to successfully drive innovation in government and solve public problems, NESTA has recently developed a competency framework for public sector innovators, highlighting competencies for experimenting and public problem-solving, along those for accelerated learning, and working together, as notable in this context.

Entrepreneurship competencies, including social entrepreneurship skills, have been recently outlined in the European Commission's Entrepreneurship Competence report, based on a review of the work of organisations and people such as Ashoka, EMES, Dees and Orhei, to mention a few. The authors of the report state that 'the competence-set relevant for traditional entrepreneurs and innovators does not necessarily need to be replaced. What changes is the wider perspective that expands the generation or expansion of economic value with the generation social value' (page 48).

However, none of the above, nor almost 50 other recent publications we had reviewed could concisely identify the most crucial *social innovation skills* individuals and teams must develop to have impact, at least not in a broad context of how social innovation is defined. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development's Skills for Social Innovation report (2016) focuses solely on integrating social innovation into the corporate world, i.e. it investigates the 'implications of integrating social impact and driving social innovation on how companies source staff and develop their skills within the core organisation and throughout the supply chain'. As the team developing the EU-funded Social Innovation Academy, we have therefore attempted to address this gap.

In search of answers

To identify the skill set that can make someone a successful social innovator and contribute to building the Social Innovation Academy, the team of ICAN Research guided by Limitless has conducted broad qualitative and quantitative research both among potential and already successful social innovators.

We have built upon existing mappings of social innovation initiatives to identify a representative baseline set of successful social innovation initiatives in Europe. Based on this we have created categories for "successful" and "potential" social innovators, operationalising both concepts. We define a "social innovator" as a person who implements an innovation that is social both in its ends and its means. However, the insights from the first stage of the research have shown that it is not enough to merely implement social innovation to become successful. What makes one successful is that the social innovation is sustained after the end of the project and, ideally, that it is scalable. Thus, we have created a clear division between **successful** and **potential** social innovators by asking them if their project was continued after its completion for a minimum of two years or if it was scalable to other societies or contexts. Only those who fulfilled those conditions were included in the successful social innovators group.

Our desk research was further deepened by online surveying. We have received 47 responses from social innovators (individuals and organisations) in fields such as health and well-being, environment, ethical consumption and production, based in seven European countries (Great Britain, Greece, Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, Slovenia and Spain) to identify a first set of core social innovation competencies. This list was further investigated, extended and validated through 10 centrally run semi-structured interviews with established social innovators selected through theoretical sampling.

A later simultaneous self-assessment conducted among 35 successful social innovators and 66 potential social innovators have enabled us to complete the list of competences required to become a successful social innovator. This methodology enabled us to not only list the required competences, but also to compare the differences between the two research groups and as a result indicate the areas which should be improved in the first place to increase the possibility of achieving success in social innovations. We have asked both groups to indicate three competences that should be developed in the first place on each stage of the social innovation process (see next section), as well as in general communication and project management.

One co-author of this article also ran a separate study (in Finnish) of 15 social innovation teams participating in the incubation phase of the Ratkaisu 100 ("Solution 100") challenge prize competition in Finland in 2017. Through five successive rounds of interviews conducted approximately at monthly intervals, this qualitative interview-based study inquired into the *team-level skills and orientations* that accounted for greater or lesser progress with developing new social innovations over the incubation period (six months).
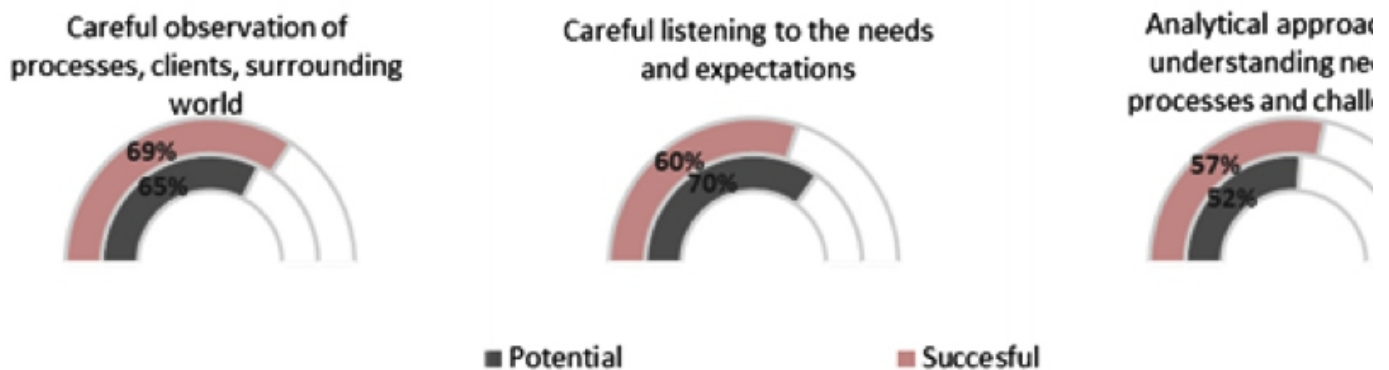
Social innovation skills uncovered

The list of skills our research elicited was examined according to the stages of social innovation process which are:

- prompts to ensure that the root causes are addressed;
- proposals which begin with generating ideas for remedies
- prototypes to test the concept's adequacy
- and development of the social innovation by sustaining, scaling and even introducing systemic changes.

We have also added a separate two areas for groups of competences required in general communication and project management, as they emerged as vital for the success on all stages of the process.
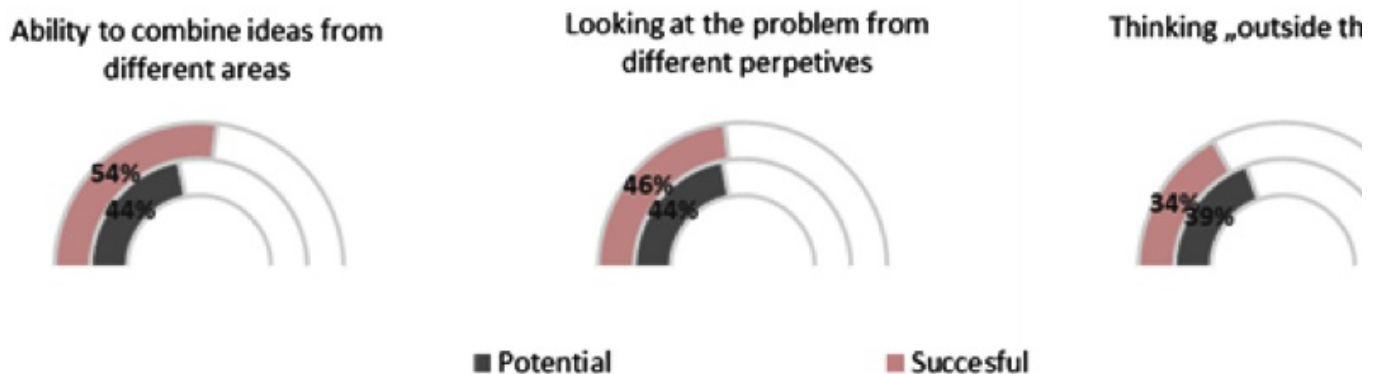
Key competencies for diagnosing the root causes to be addressed by social innovation

Successful social innovators feel the responsibility to really understand the issue they are trying to address. Analysing and deep listening, understood as careful observation of the project environment and team expectations, as well as taking an analytical approach in tackling the issues that arise, are top three competencies underlined by social innovators for an effective prompting stage of the innovation process.

Careful observation of processes, clients, surrounding world

69%
65%

Careful listening to the needs and expectations

60%
70%

Analytical approach understanding ne processes and chall

57%
52%

■ Potential   ■ Succesful

Key competencies for generating and testing successful social innovations

A recipe for successful social innovation seems to include the ability of synthesising concepts from different areas and looking at a problem from different perspectives. It requires taking a helicopter view not only of the investigated problem, but also searching for association in areas that are completely not connected with it at first glance. Also, put simply, successful social innovators leave behind conventional thinking. As reflected in the interviews, to think differently, innovators have to become questioners, puncturing the status quo. Others choose the strategy of observing the world with an intensity beyond ordinary. Those more courageous find themselves the most effective in experimenting. Overall, the skills of questioning, observing and experimenting can be used to trigger associational thinking and result with delivering an innovative concept.

Ability to combine ideas from different areas

54%
44%

Looking at the problem from different perpetives

46%
44%

Thinking „outside th

34%
39%

■ Potential   ■ Succesful

Key competencies for successful management and development of social innovation
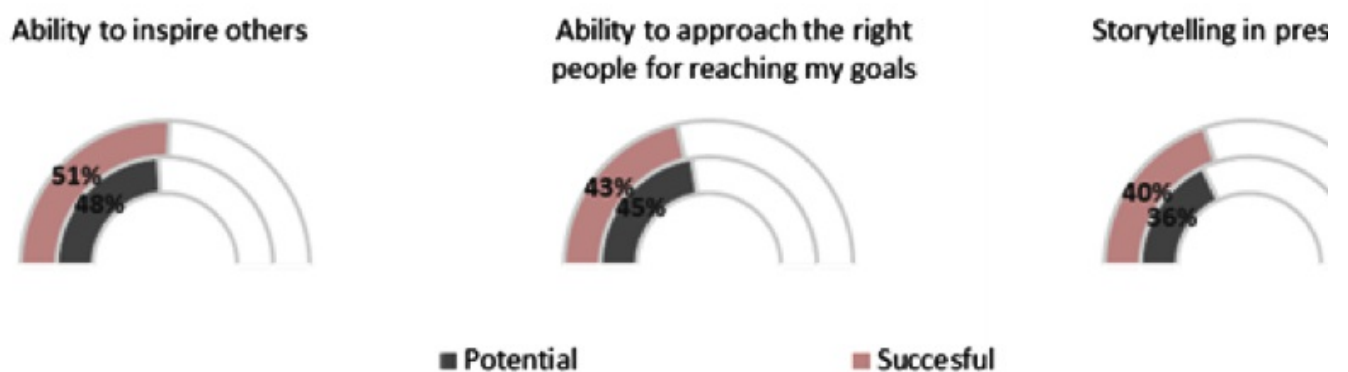
To secure the development of the innovation, being analytical and curious is not enough. A challenge is to stay focused on the goal. Indeed, staying goal-oriented has turned out to be the most important skill according to social innovators. Could this mean that a broader concept of resilience could be at play here as one of the core underlying competencies for social innovation success?

Fundamental for not losing sight is being resourceful and possessing the ability to adapt to changing conditions since social innovators often meet unexpected problems, especially with obtaining sufficient funding for the sustainability of their initiatives. Apart from resourcefulness and flexibility, which are essential for tackling *ad hoc* challenges, strategic thinking is critical to ensure successful development of the innovation.

Staying goal-oriented — Potential 85%, Successful 91%
Resourcefulness in searching for solutions — Potential 71%, Successful 83%
Strategic thinking — Potential 77%, Successful 80%
Flexibility in adapting to changing conditions — Potential 77%, Successful 80%

■ Potential   ■ Succesful

Key communication skills for social innovation success

As we reflected on the results, a consistent pattern of action emerged. The most significant social innovation competencies in communication are focused on cooperation with other parties, such as team members, beneficiaries or funders. For social innovators it is vital to be able to inspire others, but also to approach the right people in order to reach goals. Storytelling seems to social innovators as an important means to achieve these goals.

Ability to inspire others — Potential 48%, Successful 51%
Ability to approach the right people for reaching my goals — Potential 45%, Successful 43%
Storytelling in pres... — Potential 36%, Successful 40%

■ Potential   ■ Succesful

Key project management skills for social innovation success

The ability to inspire others proves critical also in the project management context. As social innovators are typically involved at many different stages of the process, they also put a strong emphasis on granting rights and sharing responsibilities, as well as understanding needs of their team members.

Ability to inspire the team
66%
70%

Granting rights and sharing responsibility with team members
66%
53%

Understanding the ne expectations of all members
51%
38%

■ Potential   ■ Succesful

Team-level competencies for social innovation

What can we say about team-level competencies that are needed when developing new social innovations? Albeit set in the specific context of a Finnish innovation prize competition, the aforementioned study on team-level factors revealed four lessons of more general relevance.

- *First*, teams that could clearly *define and articulate* the problem they were addressing and the solution they were proposing were at an advantage: they had an easier time soliciting useful feedback from various mentors, and they were more favourably evaluated by judges at the end of the competition. This is consistent with the importance of communication skills and storytelling as revealed by our questionnaire survey.
- *Second*, teams that had at least one member who could commit to their social innovation work *fully and wholeheartedly* — typically, on a full-time basis — fared better and progressed further. This speaks to the importance of focus and time management skills.
- *Third*, being *action-oriented and driven by intrinsic motivation* (rather than extrinsic rewards) was a clear benefit for teams.
- *Fourth*, teams that shared a passion for the social innovation being developed *while exercising shared leadership* had an edge. Sharing leadership meant that each person worked responsibly and autonomously on their respective areas of expertise, taking initiative rather than waiting to be led.

Why are the discoveries made in this article relevant in the first place?

If we want to teach and promote social innovation, including real 'breakout innovation', we need to know what skills help make it happen. While successful innovation always remains a mix of art and science, and social innovation is no different, by knowing what skills to pay attention to, we can better equip aspiring and existing social innovators for the challenges they will face as they go. If you combine that with necessary knowledge of social innovation process and a development of a suitable personal attitude, we believe we can have a recipe to increasing the social innovation competencies of entrepreneurs, executives, policy makers, third sector and civil society. This is exactly our ambition at the Social Innovation Academy team. Social Innovation Academy, developed by several international partner organisations, will be the first fully online programme focused exclusively on social innovation.

Authors' note: as always, our study had some limitations. The survey instrument was based on self-reporting through semi-structured questionnaires and interview guides rather than a more sophisticated instrument that could have actually disentangle values/ideals from actual practices.

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