A BALANCING ACT
Describing skills acquired in the workplace

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In collaboration with
This project does not aim to compare or contrast skills acquired in the workplace from those acquired in formal education. Rather, it enhances a broader understanding of the development of skills in the workplace. This is what lies at the heart of the project. We believe that once the proposed method and model is in active use, it will lead to more relevant and accurate skills assessment in the workplace and in the formal education system.

The project focused on skills development in the retail sector; however, we believe that the model and method described in the report and tested in three separate case studies, can be used in any workplace.

The method and model were developed in close collaboration with the following three Norwegian retail chains: Kiwi, Meny and IKEA. These chains contributed with written material, and through a series of interviews. Altogether, 22 interviews were conducted with employees, in addition to an ongoing dialogue with central leadership in the retail chains.
The balance model

The main find in the project is that the workplace is where people perform the art of balance. The most important characteristic of skills gained in the workplace is the need to master this balancing act. The action of creating good processes and delivering results requires balance between conflicting demands of daily tasks.

Mastering the different skills required to excel in this balancing act demands *balance artistes*. The retail sector is full of balance artistes, but we also believe that they are a widespread phenomenon in today’s working life.

We believe that all skills necessary in the balancing act that is today’s workplace can be categorised into three pairs of balance points:

- People – Technology
- Flexibility – Routines
- Pace – Presence

Every skill in a role or function is significant. Therefore it is important that every skill identified can be placed along one of the three balance pairs. What is crucial, however, is finding the right balance in each pair of points during the day-to-day. It is, for example, finding the balance between relations with people and relations with technology that results in resourcefulness. Similarly, finding balance between flexibility and routines is key to productivity, whilst finding balance between pace and presence results in effectivity.

A balancing act is more like trying to stand on a balance ball, than maintaining a see-saw in perfect balance ... Movement is constant, there is never perfect stillness. The balancing act is not about maintaining skills in a perfect state of balance, but rather, managing skills when change and movement is constant.
This project aims to make it possible to define skill standards in the workplace in the same way as standards are defined in the formal education system.
The four-step method

The four-step method provides a simple way of using the balance model in an individual workplace, a chain, a sector, or even on an individual basis (the three first steps).

**Step 1: Identify the skills for the role/function, and use the balance model to help create a comprehensive picture of all the skills required**

**Step 2: Determine the 10-15 most important skills for the role/function**

**Step 3: Write learning outcomes for all key skills**

**Step 4: Fill out the information required for the skills standard to qualify as a qualification**

The balance model is a useful and relevant framework for discussing skills, what exactly is at the heart of each skill, and how they can be balanced in the best possible way.

However, the four-step method is not just about facilitating a good conversation, it is about achieving the best possible description of skills. In the report we have done this by using terminology found in the education system, such as “qualification” and “learning outcome” because this can help to build bridges between standards for skills in the workplace and in the formal education system.

Not just retail

The model and method have been developed using case studies from the retail sector, but the idea is that they can be used beyond that in other sectors as well. We believe that many outside retail see the relevance of the balance model in their own workplace, and that it can be the basis of future discussions about describing skills. We believe this method can be used as a common framework that everyone, regardless of sector, can relate to and use.

The model is not prescriptive, and there is no correct or incorrect way to place skills on the balance points. It is a dynamic model, which means that a skill can be placed on different balance points depending on the context. We believe that implementation of this model will look different depending on the kind of workplace it is used in. In the world of finance for example, a great amount of time is spent on the balance between people and technology; artists and more creative workplaces are dependent on finding a good balance between flexibility and routines; whilst the balance between pace and presence is demanding when it comes to healthcare.

This project is a part of the Norwegian National Skills Policy Strategy 2017-2021. The recommendations from the report will be followed up by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, which has financed this project, in close cooperation with the Social Partners.
We recommend two ways in which we believe this report should be followed up:

1. **Within skills policy**
   We recommend that a new national standard for learning outcomes is developed. Learning outcomes can be used to bridge the gap between the education system and the workplace, but only if we have a common understanding of learning outcomes in both areas.

   We recommend that common criteria for qualifications are established and used in both the education system and in the workplace.

   All policy developments need to be negotiated in collaborative dialogue within the Norwegian three-party model - between government, employers and employees. Other relevant actors can be included to give the process the necessary clout.

2. **Further testing**
   The model and method have been developed in collaboration with three retail chains in Norway. Throughout this process we have received positive feedback that the model and method is relevant and accurate.

   The development of a new model and method has been ground-breaking, yet time-consuming. It has been necessary to establish clear expectations with each collaborative partner, and to ensure their continuous involvement throughout the process. However, this left little time for thorough testing of the model and method. Specifically, testing how the businesses or chains involved understand and use the model and method without any assistance. In the report we present cases where three retail chains have been guided in the use of the model and method by the project team.

   We recommend further systematic testing of the model and method within a broader selection of chains and sectors. We therefore recommend establishing a new testing project with the same project management team and collaboration partners.
Virke - The Enterprise Federation of Norway, The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), The Confederation of Vocational Unions (YS) and The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise (NHO) will take the initiative to use the balance model and method in retail and other areas of the labour market.

For more information about the project, and to download a copy of the full report please visit our website www.virke.no.