

COMMENTARY

Maria Lassila-Merisalo

Fellowship year abroad: A career springboard for journalists

Riikka Haikarainen's story is an example of a successful fellowship period: she acquired new skills and got to use them in her workplace by creating something completely new. A study on the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation fellowships shows that even though the academic year abroad is a significant experience for the journalists, the return to the workplace is not always smooth.

For over a decade now, the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation has offered opportunities for Finnish journalists to develop their professional competencies by studying a year in abroad universities.¹ The fellows are then to return to their home organizations with new skills and competencies which they share to their colleagues and thus benefit the whole work community.

However, the fellowship year has led to a significant amount of changes in the journalists' career paths. According to a study I conducted two years ago,² half of the fellows of the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation have changed jobs after returning from their period, and 42 percent have had significant changes in their work description.

The high mobility of the fellows came as a surprise to the foundation. That was never a goal of the program.

From the viewpoint of the fellows, the changes have been mostly to the positive. Nine out of ten of those who have experienced a career change have initiated it themselves, and the work satisfaction of the fellows has increased. However, from the point of view of the employers, the changes are more problematic.

“Like a hospice”

Only 53 percent of the fellows felt that their employer had a positive attitude toward their fellowship experience when they returned to the workplace. A negative attitude was sometimes mentioned as a reason for a career move. Furthermore, 87 percent of the fellows said that the fellowship period encouraged them to make decisions regarding their working life.

As one fellow stated: “I never would've dared to make such a decision [to resign from a permanent job], because there I would've been, living the routine of the editorial office, and no-one just leaves from there, it would be too audacious. But a year in Berlin was like a smooth landing, it helped in making the final decision. It was like a hospice.”

The fellows represent a carefully selected group of prominent journalists, and a fellowship is a significant experience in their lives. The employers ought to try and find ways to engage the returning fellows by recognizing the experience they have gained, and by giving them challenging and meaningful tasks.

Vice versa, the fellows could try and commit their employers by engaging them to their projects all the way from the beginning, showing them what there is to gain.

“From the point of view of the fellow, the system is outstanding, downright luxury. It

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would be good, if the employers figured out ways to utilize the new ideas and the energy the returning fellows bring with them. Some-

times it seems that they are intimidated by it” one fellow wrote.

Notes

1. During the time of the study, the fellowship destinations included four universities in the United States (Stanford University, Columbia University, University of California Berkeley, and University of Southern California Annenberg), Oxford University in the UK, Freie Universität in Germany, and Fudan University in China.
2. Lassila-Merisalo (2015). The study included a survey on the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation fellows from the years 2006–2013, complemented with a survey on journalists who had applied for a scholarship during the years 2010–2015 but had not been granted one, and an interview of ten fellows. The response rate of the fellow survey was 74 %, N=45, and the response rate of the control group survey was 33 %, N=52.

Reference

- Lassila-Merisalo, Maria (2015). “*Muutin koko elämäni suuntaa*”: *Helsingin Sanomain Säätiön stipendiohjelman vaikutus toimittajan urapolkuun*. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä. [Online.] Available at <<http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-6307-1>>. [Accessed 14 March 2017.]