

Transversal skills, the Swiss knife of professional success

To stand out in the professional world, skills that are transferable across any context are essential. How can they be taught and acquired? **BY LAURELINE DUVILLARD**

Transversal skills, such as project management, leadership, creative thinking and communication, are key competencies for university students to develop. These skills can be applied in any kind of role, and can help students succeed both in class and on the job market. As EPFL officially opens its Transversal Skills and Career Center, we spoke with two experts about how these skills can be taught in a university setting: **Tamara Milosevic**, who holds a PhD in life science and heads EPFL's new center; and **Roger Gfrörer**, who holds a PhD in economics and heads the Career Services of the University of Zurich. Gfrörer is a staunch believer in the Socratic view that the more you learn, the more you realize how little you know.

Why are transversal skills more important today than ever before?

Tamara Milosevic (T.M.): Because nobody works on their own anymore. The challenges we face today require a cross-disciplinary response. Transversal skills enable people to work together effectively and pool their skills to solve problems.

Roger Gfrörer (R.G.): Today's graduates have extensive technical knowledge and advanced skills, but what's sometimes missing is the glue that binds everything together. I still see a lot of competition between people in different disciplines. Having transversal skills means being able to identify when someone from another discipline can help us solve a problem. We shouldn't be condescending towards other disciplines, and should instead open up to new ways of thinking.

What's the best way to teach transversal skills?

T.M.: Teachers at universities as well as managers in the workplace need to serve as role models. They should demonstrate that it's OK to not be



perfect and to not have all the answers. At universities specifically, teachers need to create a climate where students feel comfortable and aren't afraid of being wrong. Feedback is also very important – both giving it and asking for it. Seeing transversal skills in people we admire can help us better pinpoint the things we'd like to learn. Personally, my role model was my theater teacher when I was little. She was able to spot a glimmer of something in every student that would let them shine. That helped me see my own potential.

R.G.: Role models are very important for developing transversal skills. But I have the impression that in Switzerland – unlike in the US, for example – we don't place enough emphasis on role models. At the University of Zurich, we run workshops where students are prompted to think about their own transversal skills. That lays the foundation for the kind of introspection they'll be able to use throughout their careers.

What constitutes effective feedback in your view?

T.M.: It's immediate, constructive advice that enables someone to improve.

R.G.: It's feedback that affects the person giving it as well as the person receiving it.

Given the fast pace of technological change, what skills do you think will still be essential many years from now?

T.M.: Artificial intelligence is making us rethink where we should invest our energy. Today's graduates need to be able to use these programs wisely, develop their critical thinking skills, know that biases exist and be aware of their own biases. Empathy will also be crucial for society.

R.G.: I think critical thinking skills are what will enable us to keep AI under control. If we know how to use AI responsibly, it can make us more efficient and let us apply our know-how where it's most useful. ■