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Text: Katariina Rönqvist

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Photos: Teija Soini

Human factors of industrial management

The Industrial Engineering and Management (IEM) research unit of the University of Oulu has a proven reputation for a positive atmosphere. The unit's encouraging spirit of competition also produces results. TEK and TFIF are awarding the unit the ITU Forerunners Award.

On the second Tuesday of every month, the Industrial Engineering and Management (IEM) research unit at the University of Oulu enjoys breakfast together. All 48 employees are invited. Over coffee, they discuss current issues and celebrate shared achievements, such as research results or successes in teaching.

"You can be absent if you have somewhere you need to be, but everyone tries to attend, because the whole day revolves around working together in various sections and configurations," says Head of the Research Unit, Professor **Harri Haapasalo**.

"These are semi-mandatory, but the attendance rate is still quite high," he adds happily.

The unit started having breakfast together – virtually – during COVID. The habit has stuck, but now, breakfast brings the team together in person. According to Haapasalo, shared breakfasts are a "damn good invention". If there is a decision to be made in the unit, the management can ask everyone for their opinion over breakfast. The aim is to gain a broad understanding and different perspectives on the matter and to engage staff.

"Ten years ago, we started to listen more carefully to what the work community actually needs. Transparency in decision-making and communication has always been on the wish list, and we have tried to increase it," says Haapasalo, explaining the reasons for the monthly meetings.

"Breakfast is quite a good motivator to arrive on time," adds Doctoral Researcher **Laura Kauppinen** with a smile.

Teekkari spirit of encouragement

Professor of Practice **Kari-Pekka Heikkinen** says that of all the research units at the University of Oulu, IEM has some of the best job satisfaction and well-being results. According to the results published in February 2024, the unit's overall score was 4.43/5. The average for Finnish universities was 3.87.

According to Harri Haapasalo, job satisfaction is not only improved by openness and transparency, but also by inclusion, assigning responsibility and fairness.

"Collaboration is not forbidden," explains Doctoral Researcher **Nina Jackson**.

She is pleased about the fact that in the IEM research unit, competition does not stand in the way of cooperation. The unit emphasises teamwork.

Academic autonomy is encouraged within the unit, says Heikkinen. Everyone has the opportunity to plan their work and there are various degrees of freedom in working.

“Everyone is important, and each individual is respected. We emphasise meaningful work, challenge people to learn and encourage cooperation.”

According to Heikkinen, there are competitive people working in the unit, but the competition is not brutal but rather embodies a teekkari spirit of encouragement. The number of IEM graduates with a master’s or doctoral degree has increased, as have the number of peer-reviewed research papers and the number of citations they have received. The R&D funding raised by the unit has also increased, particularly over the last five years. The Degree Programme in Industrial Engineering and Management has been awarded the international ASIIN and EUR-ACE accreditations, demonstrating the quality of education.

“There is no negative competition between individuals or research groups. Our unit is encouraging, and my colleagues have been supportive. The work-life balance is also great,” says Doctoral Researcher **Pukar Kunwar**.

Haapasalo and Heikkinen describe the IEM team as diverse and multidisciplinary. Around 15% of the staff have a foreign background, and doctoral researchers have included not only graduate engineers but also humanists and economists. Nina Jackson has a master’s degree in education.

Leader points the way

Last autumn, the University of Oulu awarded Harri Haapasalo and the IEM research unit a recognition for exemplary implementation of one of the university’s values, “succeeding together”.

“Leadership plays a significant role. It builds the culture and the norms of what is okay and what is not. Someone has to point the way, and Harri has done a great job, really outstanding,” says Heikkinen, praising his colleague.

The jury of TEK’s and TFIF’s Forerunners Award hopes that the unit will inspire other organisations to take a long-term, goal-oriented approach to developing the workplace. What lessons could the unit share with others?

“Respect and listen to others. It’s also important to have the courage to express your wishes and needs. One workplace cannot directly tell another how they should improve their atmosphere. People need to create the culture together,” says Jackson.

For more information: Harri Haapasalo, Head of research unit, harri.haapasalo@oulu.fi

Forerunners Award highlights outstanding teamwork

TEK and TFIF give the Forerunners Award to a work community or team in the field of technology that shows a particularly strong spirit of working and achieving things together. The criteria for the award include a sense of community, openness, diversity, inclusion and a supportive working culture, combined with a result-oriented approach. Completely new and effective ways of working as a team can also be grounds for the award.

The winner was selected by a jury of distinguished professionals in technology and science, chaired by **Katja Toropainen**, founder of Inklusiiv and former Chief Curator at Slush.

“The long-term development of activities in the research unit has produced tangible results, such as low stress levels and high job satisfaction among staff. In addition, the winner of the award is making a clear and concrete effort to promote the inclusion and integration of students and international talent, among others. Overall, it was also obvious that the work and themes are approached from the perspective of continuous development and learning,” says Toropainen.

The prize money is €5,000.

The application period for next year’s ITU Awards will open in November 2025. Read more: www.tek.fi/forerunners

Academic Engineers and Architects in Finland TEK is a trade union for engineers, architects, and those who have a university degree in technology or natural sciences, or who are studying these fields.

Tekniska Föreningen i Finland TFIF is the only organization in Finland for Swedish-speaking engineers, architects, and students in these fields.