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CEO and founder of HolistiX and co-author of the Social Mentoring methodology for work integration. Trained as a mechanical engineer, he holds a Master's degree focused on applications of artificial intelligence and blockchain in sustainable processes. Over the past two decades, he has worked at the intersection of awareness-based transformation methodologies, organizational development, and inclusive employment systems across the Western Balkans region. As an NLP Master Trainer and Theory U practitioner, he has designed and facilitated multi-stakeholder processes that bring together business leaders, institutional stakeholders, and donor communities to co-create employment ecosystems for hard-to-employ populations. Through HolistiX, and Public-Association for research, communication and development work, he continues to pioneer ecosystemic approaches that blend human-centered design and systems thinking to transform how societies understand and utilize human diversity in the labor market.

Human-Centered Employment Ecosystems: CoSense Design as an Awareness-Based Framework for Inclusive Work Integration

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Abstract

This article presents CoSense Design, an umbrella methodology that integrates Social Mentoring, Theory U, Neuro-Linguistic Programming practices, and Design for All principles into a stakeholder-inclusive framework for employment integration. Developed in the Western Balkans, CoSense Design addresses a fundamental design flaw in traditional inclusion work: it includes all stakeholders—businesses, institutions, donors, and hard-to-employ persons—in designing inclusion processes from the beginning, not merely in implementation. Social Mentoring provides the mentoring backbone through six-month professional support from social workers and psychologists. In parallel, businesses and institutions participate in awareness-based leadership development that shifts their operating state from judgment to sensing. The article describes how CoSense Design uses a 'trojan horse' language strategy: entering corporate spaces through performance metrics while entering institutional spaces through social impact indicators. Once inside, awareness-based methodologies quietly open space for deeper transformation. Situated in a context of severe brain drain,

the model demonstrates how crises can become openings for systemic innovation.

Keywords

CoSense Design; Social Mentoring; awareness-based leadership; Design for All; Theory U; inclusive employment ecosystems; Western Balkans

Introduction

Across the Western Balkans, we live with a paradox that has become impossible to ignore. On one hand, large segments of the population remain excluded from meaningful employment: long-term unemployed persons, people with disabilities, single parents, older workers, and young people returning from migration without clear prospects. On the other hand, businesses increasingly struggle to find and retain workers due to devastating brain drain that has hollowed out entire sectors. Employers complain that 'no one wants to work,' while those excluded for years, experience the labor market as a closed door they are expected to be grateful just to knock on.

This paradox reflects what Theory U describes more broadly: “we collectively create results that none of us actually want”. As C. Otto Scharmer frames it, key decision-makers often feel unable to redirect the course of events even when they recognize the dysfunction around them. In employment integration work, we have witnessed this pattern repeatedly. Well-intentioned inclusion projects reproduce exclusion in their own design, inviting businesses only at the end to 'hire the beneficiaries,' while keeping them distant

from the design of processes that prepare people for work. Institutional actors are asked to sign regulations, yet their operational realities are ignored. Donor organizations commission projects with ambitious social indicators, but the programs often bypass the very business metrics that determine whether companies will maintain these jobs once external funding ends.

Over time, it became clear that a different approach was needed—one that takes seriously the Design for All insight that systems designed around the margins improve life for everyone when accessibility and participation are integrated from the beginning. Applied to employment integration, this means designing processes in which all stakeholders are present from the start as legitimate co-owners of the challenge, not merely as implementers of solutions designed elsewhere. CoSense Design emerged from this recognition. It is an umbrella methodology that brings together Social Mentoring (developed by Public, Association for Research, Communication and Development from Skopje), Theory U (from the Presencing Institute and Otto Scharmer), NLP-informed practices for shifting inner states, and Design for All principles into a coherent framework for creating stakeholder-inclusive, awareness-based design spaces.

WHEN INCLUSION EXCLUDES KEY STAKEHOLDERS

When we first began working on employment integration, we were struck by how often inclusion projects were themselves built on exclusionary assumptions. The logic was familiar: businesses are driven by profit, institutions are slow and bureaucratic, donors do not understand operational realities, and long-term unemployed persons are fragile and difficult to place. The 'solution' was to create small, protected spaces where social workers or NGOs work

intensively with disadvantaged individuals, then present 'ready-made' candidates to employers at the end. On paper, everyone's role looked clear. In practice, we witnessed a cycle of disappointment.

From the perspective of hard-to-employ persons, this model often led to a painful experience of being 'parachuted' into workplace cultures that had not changed. They had worked for months with a mentor who respected their story and helped them rediscover their capabilities. Then, suddenly, they entered companies where line managers and colleagues had no understanding of this process, no time to adjust expectations, and no tools to respond to the inevitable learning curve. From the business perspective, employers found themselves pressured to hire people they had not helped prepare, within systems they had not helped design. When difficulties arose—and they always did—businesses felt tricked into social projects that undermined their operations, while job seekers felt abandoned in environments that had no real space for them.

From a Design for All perspective, the fundamental problem becomes visible: the 'user' of the employment system is defined too narrowly. Job seekers are treated as the main users, while other essential users—employers, institutional actors, donors—are treated mainly as constraints rather than co-designers. This violates a core Design for All principle: when you exclude stakeholders from the design process, you end up with systems that do not work well for anyone. The traditional inclusion narrative welcomes the 'good' stakeholders—NGOs, social workers, activists—while keeping the 'difficult' ones—profit-focused employers, bureaucratic institutions, budget-constrained donors—at a safe distance. The result is inclusion projects that structurally exclude the very actors whose participation is essential for sustainable integration.

COSENSE DESIGN AND SOCIAL MENTORING: INCLUSION OF ALL IN THE DESIGN

CoSense Design was deliberately constructed to address this design gap. As an umbrella methodology, it encompasses several interconnected components.

Social Mentoring provides the mentoring backbone: a professional, six-month program where certified social workers and psychologists accompany long-term unemployed persons toward the labor market, working on self-confidence, mindset shifts, and practical integration steps. Theory U provides the process logic for awareness-based leadership and systems change, helping participants move from 'downloading' habitual patterns to 'sensing' emerging possibilities and 'presencing' new futures. NLP-informed practices offer concrete tools for belief and state work, enabling people to shift from reactive operating states to more generative ones. Design for All provides the design lens that anticipates diversity among both people and perspectives, ensuring processes work for different types of users and stakeholders.

The crucial innovation in CoSense Design is that it treats inclusion as something that must itself be designed inclusively. This means that businesses, institutions, development agencies, and job seekers are all invited into the initiation and design of the employment process, not only into its implementation. In practice, this looks different from traditional models. When we begin work in a new context, we do not start by training unemployed persons and then approaching businesses. Instead, we convene representatives from all stakeholder groups and ask: What are the real barriers to

employment integration in this context? What would need to change for businesses to hire and retain people they currently overlook? What support do line managers and HR staff actually need? How can institutional requirements be met without overburdening either side? How can donor indicators capture both social and business outcomes?

The answers to these questions are not pre-given; they emerge through iterative co-design. But the stance from which we ask them—a stance of humble inquiry and radical inclusion—is what makes the difference. While Social Mentoring supports individual mentees through their six-month journeys, other parts of CoSense Design work in parallel with business leaders, institutional leaders, administrative staff, and development agency officers. These parallel processes help each group see their own role in the system and adjust their processes accordingly.

This is the application of Design for All to the inclusion process itself: all stakeholders become 'users' whose needs and constraints must be designed for.

THE TROJAN HORSE OF LANGUAGE: ENTERING BUSINESS AND INSTITUTIONAL WORLDS

One of the most powerful design elements in CoSense Design is what we call the 'trojan horse' language strategy. Different stakeholder groups speak different languages of value, and they open their doors to different kinds of arguments. Rather than insisting that everyone adopt the language of social inclusion from the start, CoSense Design deliberately translates between these languages while carrying a shared transformational logic inside.

When entering corporate spaces, we speak the language that business leaders care about: retention rates, time-to-productivity, performance metrics, and profit. We present data showing that companies with inclusive hiring practices combined with proper mentoring support see retention rates increase from 40% to 85% in the first year. We demonstrate how structured onboarding with external mentoring reduces time-to-full-productivity by 30-40% compared to traditional approaches. We show that teams with diverse backgrounds, when properly supported, outperform homogeneous teams on complex problem-solving tasks. These are not social arguments; they are business arguments. They open the door.

Once inside the corporate world with these performance-based entry points, awareness-based transformation begins. Through leadership development sessions framed as 'improving management effectiveness' or 'enhancing team performance,' line managers and HR staff encounter Theory U practices that invite them to examine their own assumptions about who can and cannot succeed in their organizations. They engage with NLP-based exercises that reveal how their internal states—whether they are operating from judgment, cynicism, or openness—shape the outcomes they create. They participate in co-sensing activities that help them see long-term unemployed persons not as 'charity cases' but as people with capabilities that the company genuinely needs. The business metrics that opened the door remain real and important, but the conversation has quietly expanded.

When entering institutional and donor spaces, we use a different language: employment rates of hard-to-employ populations, inclusion indicators, equity outcomes, and social participation

metrics. We present evidence showing that professionally mentored integration programs achieve placement rates of 60-75% for populations that traditional active labor market measures reach at only 10-15%. We demonstrate how coordinated institutional support reduces administrative burden on employers while increasing compliance and long-term sustainability. We show that donor investments in awareness-based leadership development for businesses generate ripple effects that extend far beyond the initial cohort of mentees. These are social impact arguments. They open institutional and donor doors.

Once inside institutional and donor worlds with these social impact entry points, transformation again begins. Development agency officers who initially framed their work purely in terms of social indicators start seeing how business sustainability determines whether their programs have lasting effects. Institutional actors who thought of inclusion as a regulatory requirement begin understanding it as an opportunity to redesign active labor market measures in ways that actually work. Donor representatives who measured success purely by numbers of people trained start caring about the quality of internal company processes that determine whether those people will still be employed two years later. The social metrics that opened the door remain real and important, but the conversation has expanded to include business transformation and organizational development.

This 'trojan horse' strategy is ethically grounded in a simple recognition: the goal is not to trick stakeholders but to meet them where they are while inviting them into wider horizons. Businesses do need better retention and productivity; these concerns are legitimate. Donors and institutions do need measurable social

impact; these concerns are also legitimate. CoSense Design honors both sets of concerns by showing that when we design employment processes with all stakeholders from the beginning and support them through awareness-based development, we can achieve outcomes that are simultaneously good business and good social policy. The apparent contradiction dissolves when the design includes everyone.

FROM EXTERNAL SOCIAL MENTORS TO INTERNAL PROFESSIONAL MENTORS

A critical feature of CoSense Design is that it explicitly designs for handover from the beginning. From Social mentors to Professional mentors.

Social Mentoring's external to companies -Social mentors are trained social workers and psychologists that accompany long-term unemployed persons through their six-month journey into the labor market. This external support is crucial: it provides safety, builds confidence, works through trauma and long-term exclusion, and helps people navigate the complex transition from being outside the system to entering it. External mentors have the professional distance and expertise to do this work well.

However, if external mentoring (Social mentoring) were the only intervention, it would create dependency and fragility. The person enters the workplace, but the workplace itself has not fundamentally changed. When the external mentor exits the mentoring process after the employee is placed at the workplace, the mentee is left in an environment that may or may not understand or support their continued development. This is why CoSense Design includes a second layer: internal Professional mentoring inside companies,

carried out by trained HR staff and line managers who have participated in the parallel awareness-based leadership development process.

These internal mentors apply the same inclusive and Design for All principles that external mentors use, but now embedded within everyday organizational life. They understand that integration is not a one-time event but an ongoing process. They recognize that the new employee may need different onboarding rhythms, different communication styles, or different kinds of feedback than what the company habitually provides. Because they have gone through awareness-based development themselves—examining their own assumptions, practicing sensing rather than judging, learning to shift their operating states—they are capable of creating inclusive spaces within the organization that can sustain integration long after external support has ended.

This handover design reflects a Theory U insight: sustainable change happens when the 'operating code' of a system shifts, not merely when external actors compensate for systemic dysfunction. If we want employment ecosystems that are genuinely inclusive, the capacity for inclusion must live inside the businesses, institutions, and agencies that constitute the ecosystem. External mentors catalyze and model the process, but internal actors must eventually carry it. Social mentoring itself structures this transition deliberately, with external and internal mentoring running in parallel during the initial phase, then gradually shifting responsibility until the internal capacity is strong enough to stand alone.

THE BACK-END: THEORY U, NLP, AND OPERATING STATES

We refer to Theory U, NLP practices, and frameworks like Nadim Hamdan's 'Three Operating States of People in Organizations' as the back-end of CoSense Design. They are not presented to participants as separate theoretical modules; rather, they function as the underlying logic that shapes how facilitators design and guide processes. Understanding this back-end helps explain why CoSense Design works differently from conventional inclusion programs.

Theory U offers a process architecture for moving from unconscious reproduction of old patterns to conscious co-creation of new futures. The key insight is that our actions flow from an 'inner place'—assumptions, habits, emotional states—that we rarely examine. When leaders operate from judgment, they see problems as external. When they operate from openness and sensing, they perceive the system as it actually is, including their own role in creating outcomes they claim to reject. In employment integration, this might mean sensing that brain drain is not merely a threat but an opening for redesigning how we think about human capability.

Theory U unfolds in five movements.

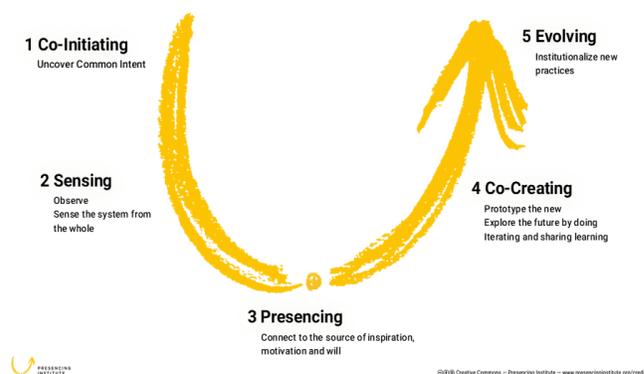


Figure 1. Theory U diagram

NLP-informed practices provide concrete techniques for shifting these inner states. Simple exercises in reframing beliefs or exploring different perceptual positions help people experience how their internal states shape perception and action. Hamdan's Three Operating States framework—distinguishing reactive, responsive, and generative states—helps participants recognize what state they are in and make conscious choices about shifting when needed. CoSense Design processes support movement toward more generative states, recognizing that sustainable change requires not just new structures but new capacities for awareness and choice.

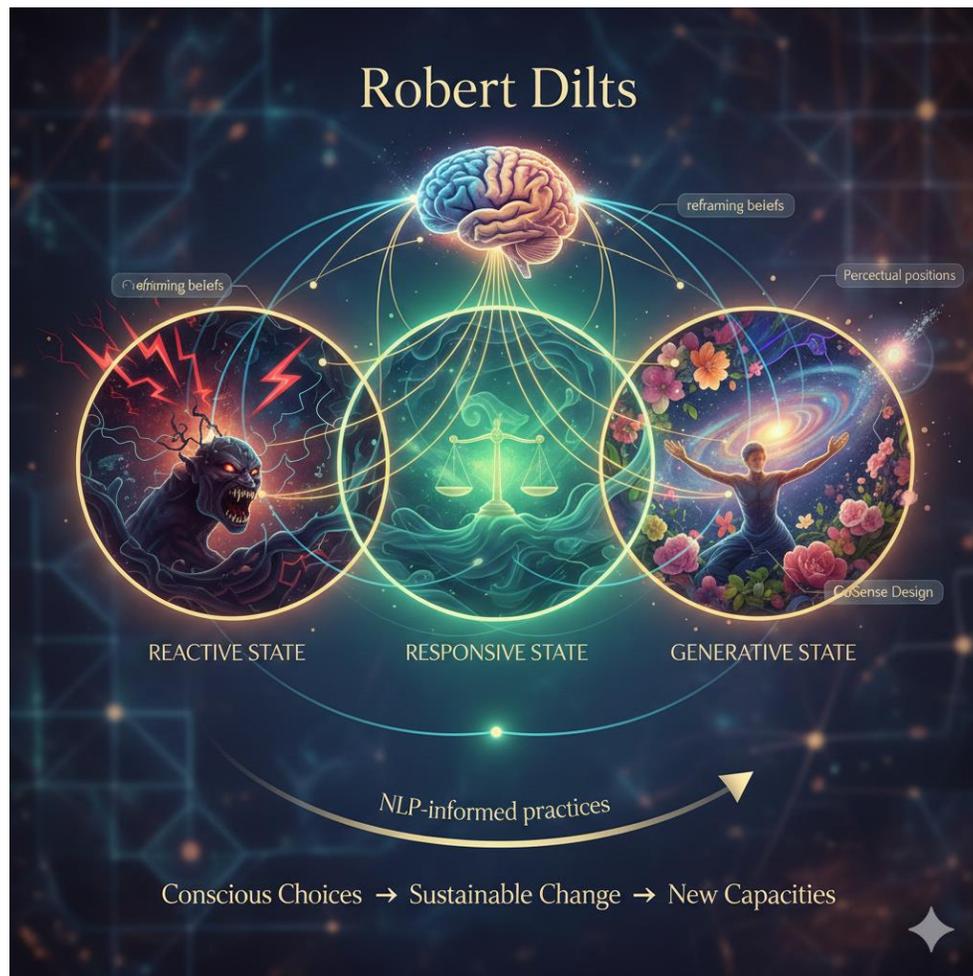


Figure 2. Hamdan's Three Operating States framework

These back-end processes operate quietly. Participants rarely hear lectures about Theory U or NLP. Instead, they engage in carefully sequenced activities—co-sensing exercises, stakeholder mapping, dialogue practices—that embody these methodologies. The facilitator creates conditions in which participants can experience shifts in their own awareness and discover that different ways of seeing and acting are possible.

REGIONAL DRIVER AND IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER REGIONS

The Western Balkans context gives CoSense Design a particular urgency and a particular opening. Severe brain drain has created chronic labor shortages across key sectors, making employers more willing to hire from groups they previously overlooked—if they receive proper support. This crisis became the regional driver that opened space for the work. When business leaders say 'we are ready to hire people we would not have considered before if we have adequate support,' they are already halfway toward a new model. CoSense Design answers this readiness by providing a structure that makes the support real, reliable, and sustainable.

However, we do not present CoSense Design as limited to the Western Balkans or dependent on brain drain as the only possible driver. Every region has its own crises and openings: technological disruption displacing workers, aging populations creating care gaps, youth unemployment threatening social cohesion, migration creating both challenges and opportunities, climate change requiring rapid transitions. Not to mention the AI disruption. The question for practitioners in any context is: What is the crisis or opening in our region that could serve as an entry point for redesigning

employment and organizational systems? Once that driver is identified, the CoSense Design approach becomes relevant: convene all stakeholders, translate between their languages, design processes with everyone from the beginning, support awareness-based development, and build in handover from external to internal capacity.

Regions considering whether this approach might work for them can start by examining where their current inclusion efforts may be excluding key stakeholders. Are businesses treated primarily as donors or as genuine partners in co-design? Are institutions seen as obstacles to bypass or as co-creators of enabling frameworks? Are donors perceived only as sources of funding or as actors whose learning and evolution matter? Mapping these patterns honestly can reveal where the design of the process needs to change. As Theory U reminds us, “we collectively create results that no one wants” when we operate from unconscious patterns; the first step toward change is making those patterns visible.

CoSense Design also suggests that practitioners pay attention to language as a strategic design element. What is the 'trojan horse' that can enter corporate, institutional, or community spaces in your specific context? Which metrics, stories, or values open doors? How can you honor these entry points while carrying deeper transformational content inside? This requires ethical clarity—the goal is not to trick stakeholders but to meet them where they are while inviting them into wider horizons. It also requires sensitivity to local culture, history, and power dynamics. The trojan horse that works in the Western Balkans may look different in East Asia, Latin America, or North America, but the principle remains: start with

what stakeholders already care about, then expand the conversation once you are inside.

CONCLUSION

CoSense Design offers a replicable approach for moving from charity-based inclusion to performance-enhancing diversity utilization. By bringing together Social Mentoring, Theory U, NLP-informed practices, and Design for All principles, it creates stakeholder-inclusive design spaces where businesses, institutions, donors, and hard-to-employ persons co-create employment processes together. The fundamental insight is simple but demanding: if we want employment systems that are truly for all, we must design them with all.

This means inviting those previously excluded into the heart of the process: profit-focused business leaders, institutional officers, donor representatives, and long-term unemployed persons themselves. It means speaking multiple languages of value—performance metrics, social impact indicators, human dignity—without losing our ethical center. It means supporting stakeholders through awareness-based development so they can shift from judging to sensing, from ego-system to eco-system awareness, from unconsciously creating results no one wants to consciously design systems that reflect what we collectively care about.

Social Mentoring provides the professional mentoring backbone, with certified social workers and psychologists offering six-month support. But individual mentoring alone cannot transform employment ecosystems. Businesses participate in leadership development that helps them adjust practices. Institutions and donors engage in co-design that makes requirements more practical

and investments more sustainable. The handover from external mentors to internal professional mentors ensures integration becomes embedded in organizational life.

The 'trojan horse' language strategy makes multi-stakeholder design possible. By entering corporate spaces through performance metrics and institutional spaces through social impact indicators, while carrying awareness-based transformation inside both, CoSense Design respects each stakeholder's priorities while expanding what is considered possible. The apparent contradiction between business performance and social inclusion dissolves when we design processes that genuinely serve both.

We believe awareness-based, Design for All–informed approaches like CoSense Design offer a path toward employment ecosystems in which human diversity is recognized as strength rather than problem. When individual mindset shifts, organizational culture development, and systemic policy alignment move together, work integration becomes a core expression of how societies understand themselves. The real trojan horse may be the assumption that inclusion and performance are separate goals. Once we allow this assumption to dissolve through co-sensing and co-design, a new kind of employment ecosystem can emerge—one in which we no longer choose between doing good and doing well because we have designed our systems so that they reinforce each other.

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