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May 20, 2016

# Newsletter from the Nordic Labour Journal 4/2016



Theme: From psychosocial sick leave to well-being and attendance at work



Financed by  
Nordic Council of  
Ministers

## **NORDIC LABOUR JOURNAL**

Work Research Institute  
OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University,  
Postboks 4 St. Olavs plass, NO-0130  
Oslo

## **PUBLISHER**

Work Research Institute, OsloMet  
commissioned by the Nordic Council of  
Ministers.

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An email edition of the newsletter can  
be ordered free of charge from  
[www.nordiclabourjournal.org](http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org)

ISSN 1504-9019 tildelt: Nordic labour  
journal (online)



**REDAKTØR-  
ANSVAR**

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# Editorial: The psychosocial challenge

The story about Kristján from Iceland in this month's theme illustrates how exposed young people often are in working life. When the Nordic Labour Journal shines a light on the psychosocial working environment, the story widens out. The theme shows how organisational changes are needed and how systematic efforts can turn sick leave figures on their heads.

## COMMENTS

20.05.2016

BY BERIT KVAM

Complicated phenomena rarely have simple explanations. The psychosocial working environment is a challenge which could be linked to the way work is organised, social relations and how the individual employee relates to his or her task. But some correlations are known. We know that high expectations combined with poor control rarely give good odds, and we know this also applies to Norwegian women in the health and care sector. They are at increased risk of having to take sick leave as a result of psychosocial factors, according to Norway's National Institute of Occupational Health, STAMI.

Expectations and control are linked. When the Finnish researcher Lotta Harju talks about the consequences of workplace boredom, pointing out that a "boreout" can be as dangerous as a "burnout", this could be a similar problem, yet there is little academic knowledge about boredom. It seems that the consequences of low expectations combined with a low degree of self determination leads to low job satisfaction.

There is, however, more knowledge around increased job intensity, and this has fuelled the debate on the psychosocial working environment across Europe, with many worrying about the increases in sick leave. Innovative solutions to organisational, cultural and relational issues show that it is possible to address the challenges. The FAFO report 'Together for a Better Municipality' shows that "A focus on attendance has reduced sick leave by 40 percent" during the project in Songdalen municipality.

'SPARK' is the name of a programme jointly launched by Danish municipalities and the main organisations in the municipal labour market in order to improve the psychological working environment. Lolland municipality is already well underway, and got an award for their work to improve the psychological working environment in 2015. This is the result of active efforts running over several years, says Peer Frederiksen in 'A top psychological working environment'.

It is possible to create change if you build on knowledge and a conscious and systematic way of doing things. Research and our own examples show that leadership is invaluable in this respect. Sweden's municipalities and county councils are promoting the importance of good leadership in the development of good working environments, including those for leaders in front line occupations who are often under pressure.

"We need to learn how to organise work so that it lasts for an entire working life," is the challenge from Professor Emeritus Annika Härenstam at the University of Gothenburg. In this month's theme, she argues the costs of sick leave and the future staffing of jobs in the care sector seem to be the only arguments which count when you want to really get to grips with the psychosocial challenge.



## Young workers at greater risk of psychological ill health

Many young workers in the Nordic countries live dangerously in the workplace, according to a new Nordic report. The risk for physical injury as well as psychological ill health is considerably higher among young workers compared to older ones.

THEME

20.05.2016

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, PHOTO: ARNÞÓR BIRKISSON

For Icelandic Kristján Rúnar Egilsson it started with a physical workplace accident, which turned into a depression and psychological ill health. When he turned 22 his arm was caught in a door at work and he needed to have an operation. The whole process was supposed to take around six months. But the accident threw Kristján into a crisis. He lost all routines and was diagnosed with depression and severe anxiety. It has taken him six years to get back on his feet.

A new study called 'Young workers and sustainable work life', published by the Nordic Council of Ministers, shows that young workers in the Nordic region are struggling with similar work-related challenges. People between 15 and 34 are at greater risk of suffering from depression compared to older workers. Nearly half (40 percent) have an increased risk of depression and more than two thirds (70 percent) have a greater risk of work-related headaches. For young people the

risk of developing a skin condition as a result of the working environment is three times higher than for older workers.

The report is based on statistics and literature and shows that young workers are up to 70 percent more likely to perform heavy physical work, and they are nearly twice as likely to have a workplace accident compared to their older colleagues. Agriculture, forestry and fisheries are the sectors which carry the greatest risk for workplace accidents in the Nordic region.

There are also differences between the sexes. Young men are more likely to suffer a workplace accident than women. The reason is that men more than women often have dangerous working tasks.

### **Accident made him loose his footing**

Icelandic Kristján Rúnar Egilsson has had his share of work-related difficulties. Several things which have happened since his 2010 workplace accident have made him loose his footing and have complicated his rehabilitation. But he has always kept his focus – to continue being active in the labour market and being self sufficient.

“The accident stopped me in many different ways,” says Kristján who will finish his vocational training to be a graphical printer this spring.

He thinks back to the time of the accident when his life started feeling unsafe. Kristján had been working for several years at the swimming baths in his home town of Kópavogur in Iceland when his right hand was caught in a door. Kristján went on sick leave right away on doctor’s orders. But suddenly, a few months later, he was fired from his job with no warning.

“The swimming baths’ leadership illegally fired me during my sick leave,” Kristján claims.

“When I rang the boss he told me the reason was that I had not come in to work. I went straight to the union with this and won,” he says.

### **Did not believe him**

Kristján says that young people meet more prejudice than others in Iceland’s labour market, and he is of the impression that management did not believe him when he told them that he couldn’t work. According to him there was no trust between management and employees, which he believes was because of the basic belief in Iceland that if you are young, you are also healthy and should be able to work.

“Some think it is laziness when you don’t come in to work despite the fact that you are in plaster and have a doctor’s note,” he says.

Kristján had an operation, was given work rehabilitation and help with his depression. His dream was to train to be a photographer, so he moved to Denmark to study. But he was in pain and suffered from a severe depression. It dawned on him that he would never be a photographer. His hand could not perform all the little movements which a photographer must make.

### **No sickness allowance**

Back in Iceland Kristján was told he did not qualify for sickness allowance because he had spent just over a year in Denmark. He would not regain that right for another three years. He almost lost his footing again. Kristján suffered pain and severe depression. And he had no income. Things did not look bright when Kristján once again got work rehabilitation and help from a psychologist. After a while he decided to train as a graphic printer, and this spring he is sitting his exams and has overcome the worst difficulties in his life. He

still suffers from pain, but is in control of his depression and now works at a printing press in Reykjavik.

But Kristján is not the only young person with work-related difficulties in the Nordic region. Youth employment levels in Iceland are certainly better than in many other Nordic countries – 70 percent compared to for instance Sweden’s 42 percent – yet young adults often have part time jobs and unusual working hours which can complicate their lives.

Literature also shows that issues like unemployment, self-rated ill health, dropping out from studying and belonging to an ethnic minority also contribute to low labour market participation.

The new Nordic report also shows there is a lack of knowledge about which role or opportunities business leaders have to strengthen and maintain a healthy working environment for young workers.

See all articles in theme

# A top psychological working environment on the Danish island of Lolland

Employees should be whistling when they go to work and when they go home again. That is the ambition at the Center for Social Indsats (Centre for Social Measures) – a municipal workplace employing 275 people on the Danish island of Lolland. And there are many reasons to whistle contently: their psychological working environment has been named the best in Denmark.

THEME

20.05.2016

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

Denmark aims to reduce the number of psychologically challenged employees by 20 percent by 2020, and some workplaces have come far. One is Center for Social Indsats in Lolland municipality, where sick leave has gone from sky high to very low, and nearly all employees say they enjoy work.

The change has happened over relatively few years, and the recipe has been to actively work to create a good working environment, explains Peer Frederiksen, an outreach social worker at the Center for Social Indsats.

“It is our management’s aim to whistle both on the way to work and on the way home again. And that is nearly the way things have turned out. Our annual work satisfaction survey shows that nearly all employees are very satisfied with their work, and sick leave has fallen by 75 percent – from 9.5 percent to 2.8 percent. That is very low for this area,” says Peer Frederiksen.

He has been present at the workplace during the entire process of creating a better working environment. It is now so good that the Danish Working Environment Council has named it Denmark’s best working environment. The Working Environment Council is a forum where large employers’ and employees’ organisations cooperate for the continued development of better working environments in Denmark.

## Open management

The Working Environment Council awarded Center for Social Indsats the 2015 working environment prize in the category psychological working environment. The Center was praised for working to promote trust, respect, decency, involvement and acknowledgement.

Using the slogan ‘freedom to take responsibility’ the Center for Social Indsats gives employees a large say over how their work is adapted so that it works in the best possible way for

each individual team. Individual needs are also very much looked after. The judges also noted that the relationship between employees and management is very open and honest, and that the management is very open to new ideas as well as good and critical feedback.

That is something Peer Frederiksen recognises.

“Nobody will go to the management in vain, and if someone needs a bit of backup they get it. We have a very open management team, and always know where our leader is during the day and how to get hold of him.”

Peer Frederiksen believes the positive development started in 2007, when the Center got a new leader.

“The working environment at the time was not very good. Many employees felt left to their own devices, and this led to absenteeism and low morale. Today our motto is ‘leave no-one behind’, and this permeates everything we do. No-one is left to their own devices, we all look after each other, and if someone is down it is quickly dealt with.”

## Focus on learning

Center for Social Indsats is an umbrella organisation for a range of municipal units with different tasks and skills in different areas: the municipal centre for drug abuse, a women’s crisis centre, a centre of social psychiatry, a centre for neuro-pedagogy and several meeting places and living quarters. A total of 275 employees are working across different workplaces.

Earlier each unit was its own ‘island’ where employees might have felt very isolated, remembers Peer Frederiksen. Now he sees how employees enjoy a much bigger community. It has become natural to give colleagues a helping hand and to work across different units.

Another important change is that gossip has been banned.

“If you have something to tell a colleague, it is all out in the open so that any issue can be solved,” says Peer Frederiksen.

The Center for Social Indsats enjoys close cooperation with the working environment organisation – which includes an annual workplace assessment. There is strong focus on allowing each individual employee the chance to learn and develop. Peer Frederiksen feels the management is very open to his requests for skills development.

“They work continuously to improve our skills, because the workplace wants us to develop and to learn how to do things in new ways. Even though we run a tight budget, I still have not been told no when I have requested going on a course. This has a great positive effect on my work satisfaction.”

See all articles in theme





## Many Danish municipalities seek help to improve psychological working environments

A newly formed group of consultants will be helping municipalities improve employees' psychological working environments. There is great interest in getting support.

THEME

20.05.2016

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: TOM BAGGER

The psychological working environment is under pressure in municipalities, which include some of Denmark's largest employers with responsibility for welfare services like nurseries, schools and care for the elderly. In recent years, municipalities have seen many changes and reforms which have been demanding on management and staff. All this challenges the psychological working environment.

That is why the main organisations for municipal workplaces, the Danish Association of Local Government Employees Organisations (*Forhandlingsfællesskabet*) and Local Government Denmark (KL) have jointly established a group of consultants who will go out and provide support for lead-

ers and workers' representatives in municipal workplaces in order to secure a good psychological working environment.

Both KL and *Forhandlingsfællesskabet* believe a good psychological working environment is a prerequisite for solving municipal welfare tasks. The setting up of the consultant group, called SPARK, was agreed during the 2015 collective bargaining process, and it has now started work. The group consists of five consultants who are now operative. The first visit to a municipality was carried out in May 2016, and other municipalities show great interest in getting the consultants' help, says Rikke Bruun, head of the secretariat at SPARK.



“So far we have received 80 applications from municipalities which would like help from SPARK. This shows that there is both a need for our services in the municipalities and a demand for what our consultants can offer,” says Rikke Bruun.

### **Empowering the trio**

SPARK is made up of five consultants who are all experienced facilitators in processes dealing with psychological working environments. Their job is defined by the social partners: to provide knowledge and tools for management, working environment representatives and workers’ representatives – known as the trio – which will allow them to move forward with following up the workplaces’ psychological working environments.

A workplace trio can be given one or several sparring sessions together with a SPARK consultant. Using their own situation, they will explore how they can work with employees in order to improve the psychological working environment. The SPARK consultant does not meet the employees’ group.

“We empower the trio to act in relation to the psychological working environment, allowing it to bring about a better psychological working environment in their workplace in the long term. Hopefully this initiative will also make all workplaces focus more on the psychological working environment – not just the ones the SPARK consultants work with,” says Rikke Bruun.

Municipalities can seek help from SPARK for four fairly broad categories of challenges related to the psychological working environment:

- Uncertainty and insecurity resulting from changes and transitions.
- Problems in cooperation between employees and/or leaders in the workplace, including conflicts and in extreme cases harassment and bullying.
- Risk of violence and threat from citizens, users or tenants.
- Problems in relation to the content, size or execution of work

### **Sudden changes**

So far SPARK has received applications in all four categories, but most want help to handle changes. This does not come as a surprise to Rikke Bruun.

“Many municipalities have a tight economy and must make further cuts while developing and redefining many municipal services. That has an impact on both municipal employees’ working tasks and the psychological working environment. As a result, many of the municipal workplaces seek help to handle sudden processes of change without damaging the psychological working environment.”

SPARK is the Danish acronym for ‘Cooperation for Psychological Working environments in the Municipalities - the parties’ support for local dialogue and action’. SPARK consul-

tants are expected to visit 250 to 300 municipal workplaces a year. So far a budget has been provided until 2018, and the system will be evaluated in 2017. After that, KL and *Forhandlingsfællesskabet* will decide whether it will continue.

See all articles in theme



## Working women's psychological ill health made worse by uneven structures

There has been a strong increase in work-related psychological ill health in Sweden in recent years. People working in the health, education and care sector are particularly exposed. But this is not only a Swedish phenomenon. The same development can be found in all developed economies, and hardest hit are women and youths.

THEME

20.05.2016

TEXT AND PHOTO: GUNHILD WALLIN

“Working environment issues are hotter than ever. Employers and politicians are very worried about the rising cost of sick leave. There is also a daily debate on competence provision and a severe strains on welfare. It is very important to be an attractive employer, and that is when the working en-

vironment becomes an important component,” said Caroline Olsson, head of the working life section at the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. She was introducing the seminar ‘How do organisations and leaders create a sustainable working environment?’ held in March 2016.

The conference highlighted the current fears in Sweden for work-related psychological ill health. It is one example of how politicians, researchers and civil servants are furrowing their brows over how to break the rapidly rising level of psychological ill health in the workplace. Some days later new regulations in the Working Environment Act came into force, introducing new demands for good social and organisational working environments – not least in the link between demands and control.

This particular conference, organised by Swedish municipalities and county councils, several trade unions and research institutions like the Stress Research Institute, wanted to draw attention to the importance of leadership for the working environment. The aim was also to look at leaders' own working environments, not least leaders in frontline jobs, who are often forgotten. It is after all they who are closest to the work and who handle many of the problems which can arise in the meeting with customers regardless of whether they are students, older people in need of care, pre-school children and their parents or patients.

### **Not a women's issue but a structure issue**

Two thirds of working women now work in the so-called contact occupations – typically in the healthcare, education and care sector. These are the worst hit by sick leave as a result of a psychological diagnosis. The number of long term illness with a psychological diagnosis more than doubled between 2009 and 2014. It is a broad term – it could be about stress, exhaustion, worry, anxiety, but it is a diagnosis which often results in long term sick leave.

The fact that female dominated sectors like health, education and care are worst hit means the issue is often addressed as if it were a women's problem. This makes one of Sweden's most senior working life research professors speak up.

"It makes me angry when you talk about women's working environments, when in fact it is structural issues which create a bad working environment. It is equally bad for the men who work there as for the women," says Annika Härenstam, Professor Emeritus of work science at the University of Gothenburg. She is currently a lecturer and researcher at the Stockholm University's Department of Psychology.

There are complex reasons behind the worrying development of psychological ill health in female dominated occupations. One factor is the expansion of the public sector in the 1970s. Before then most care took the form of unpaid work at home, and few women were full time providers during an entire working life. Then society was organised in a way which would allow women to combine work and family life.

"The public sector was not created for the professional full time employee. You were not given status but was viewed as interchangeable secondary labour. It was meant to be possible to change jobs in order to adapt to the family's needs, and

you were not irreplaceable because it should be possible to take parental leave.

"But both the tempo and demands were high. The idea was also that you should not spend all of your time in the care sector. It is only now that we see the effects of working full time for an entire working life in that sector. It is an accumulated strain," says Annika Härenstam and adds:

"The organisations which were built were flat, they were made up of women and women have been in those positions ever since."

### **The problem with measuring care**

For a long time things went well. Until the early 1990s jobs like nursing and teaching were considered to be so-called healthy occupations. There were economic resources available and also more resources to support for example janitors, cleaners, nursing assistants and secretaries. There was also less control.

Then came the crisis in the 1990s. Public sector costs had run wild and politicians wanted to regain control. Many assistant nursing positions and supporting jobs like secretary and janitor disappeared, companies and departments were merged and many companies had to make severe cuts. Last but not least came the introduction of New Public Management, modelled on the business sector. This meant tougher and more detailed control from the top.

As an example of today's reality, a modern manager of a care institution for the elderly needs to master up to 22 computer programs, in addition to all the legislation and regulations covering the health, education and care sector. New demands are constantly added, but rarely come with additional support.

"The change was driven by the desire to save money, but also by the decision-makers' desire to remove power from professionals. The result was large and unprofessional cuts," says Annika Härenstam.

There was also no-one at hand when the sectors were being measured to explain the difference between measuring a hard business compared to measuring a so-called soft business. Working with people is limited to a time and a place, you often get immediate feedback – good or bad – and you use yourself as a tool. That makes the work difficult to measure and difficult to streamline.

At the same time many who work in the education, health and care sector feel it is meaningful and enriching, which could have contributed to a culture where it was not considered right to compare people with numbers.

### **Different worlds for technical and care administrations**

Eight years later nobody called these occupations the healthy ones. Working environments in the health, education and care sector led to a sharp rise in sick leave numbers. With a few exceptions the numbers have risen year on year since then, and a psychological diagnosis is by far the most common cause.

And the numbers continue to rise, to the detriment of those who are hit, to businesses and to the economy as a whole. Today the total cost of work-related psychological ill health is three to four percent of GDP in all OECD countries, and it continues to rise. This development worries politicians in Sweden and in many other developed economies. There are now plans in place in Sweden, and in other OECD countries, for how to reduce sick leave and how to stop the negative spiral of work-related psychological ill health.

Annika Härenstam believes one important measure will be to understand the basic differences between different sectors in society or within a municipality. It is not as simple as saying a bad working environment is synonymous with being a municipal employee.

It depends on where you work, what you do and just how this work is being organised. It is important to understand this in order to make changes to the working environment to suit a particular company. As long as you compare care with care, it is difficult to make changes. Conditions are accepted in one sector which would never be accepted in another. Between 2008 and 2014 Annika Härenstam and research colleagues ran the CHEFiOS project at the University of Gothenburg.

It looked at the working conditions for public sector leaders, and was a cooperation with three municipalities in western Sweden plus Gothenburg Water. The project showed that the conditions for a leader in a technical administration was quite different from a similar position within the health, education and health sector.

“Our systematic comparison showed worrying signs of highly different conditions for leaders depending on where they worked. Leaders for technical administrations were listened to, met with respect and considered to be experts. Leaders within the care sector have a completely different status – they do not live in the same world,” says Annika Härenstam.

### **”My God, is this how it is for you”**

The technical administrations had clear goals, fewer subordinates, a different contact network linking to management and most had succeeded in avoiding parts of New Public Management by arguing their company was far too complex. Politicians were more interested in these companies than in the ones in the care sector, and technical leaders were treated like experts and listened to. If workloads were heavy, the leaders in technical management could approach politicians and get help with their priorities.

The research shows very different conditions within the health, education and care sector. The targets are more blurry and politicians like to think of themselves as the experts. When a leader within the care sector wants help, she – because more often than not it is a woman – is told that “you will have to reprioritise, you’re so good at that”. Leaders head large groups and it is not uncommon to have 50 or more subordinates.

“We have always distinguished between technical administrations and those of the health, education and care sector. Workplace inspectors are responsible for one or the other, and no comparisons are made. When the Work Environment Authority allows inspectors who normally visit technical administrations to go to the care for the elderly, the reaction might be: ‘My God, is this how it is for you?’,” says Annika Härenstam.

In order to address work-related psychological ill health you need to understand the structures which create ill health, she says. That is why it is wrong to talk about women’s working environments. When measures are introduced to improve men’s conditions in the industry, you never talk about men’s working conditions. You simply talk about working conditions.

### **Conversational arenas**

“As long as we keep talking about women’s working environments, we are maintaining the divide. Instead we should look at how it really is and learn how to organise work in a way which allows people to manage an entire working life. We need to remember that sick leave is not equal to ill health, it is about how well you adapt the demands to each individual worker’s abilities,” she says.

So how do you create a sustainable working life for leaders, and how can they in turn create a good working environment?

You need different strategies depending on the situation at the unit or workplace where you are. It is important to describe how things look and to communicate this. What is the balance between demands and resources like? How many subordinates does the boss have? There is no reason why leaders in the care sector should have three times as many subordinates as those in technical administrations.

“Frontline leaders are enormously important for discovering ill health among staff, but if you are responsible for too many subordinates you won’t have time for that. This, I think, is an important reason for the rise in psychological ill health,” says Annika Härenstam.

The lines of communication between strategic management and businesses need to be improved and inspected. Perhaps some businesses need more support, and of course a better balance between demands and resources – which will always be central to a good working environment.

Influence and contacts are also central for leaders to be able to run a good business, also for employees. Many also say they need support and a sounding board. You cannot change what you produce, but you can change how it is produced, and this is where politicians can change things.

“They can involve experts and listen to those who know their job. Today the care sector management operates far from the decision makers compared to the technical administrations. You therefore need to create arenas where you can meet, but also where you can develop a common language.”

To change structures you need fresh thinking, nearly a cultural revolution, thinks Annika Härenstam. But this could create a modern way of organising work which would benefit employees, users and the labour market.

“The main and nearly only perceived threat today is the future staffing in the care sector, and the costs connected to sick leave and the changeover of leaders,” she says.

See all articles in theme

# Sick leave down by 40 percent after focus on attendance

The Norwegian municipality of Songdalen went against the grain in order to cut the level of sick leave. They concentrated on attendance instead of absence, and used the staff's own knowledge about their working environment with great success.

THEME

20.05.2016

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

“When you focus on attendance rather than sick leave you give employees themselves the chance to improve the factors that lead to better attendance,” says researcher Trond Stalsberg Mydland at the research institute Agderforskning. He has been research observer for the four years the project has been running.

Songdalen municipality in Vest Agder county in the south of Norway has a population of some 6,400. 2012 saw the introduction of ‘The value project – better attendance’ at three preschools and one provider of home visits to the elderly. Two years later the project expanded to include five preschools. The Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, KS, launched the initiative which has been carried out together with Songdalen and Arendal municipalities.

The project is also part of a more comprehensive development programme called ‘Together for a better municipality’, initiated by Norway’s Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation. It aims to deal with the challenges around sick leave, skills and recruitment, full-time culture and reputation. A total of 104 municipalities have taken part and have run their own local programmes dealing with one or more of the focus areas. ‘Together for a better municipality’ builds on the cooperation between the social partners, the state and researchers.

## Factors for improving workplace health

The FAFO research institute recently published a final report on the four year long development programme, summing up the results from the different focus areas. The report shows that fewer people go off sick in 85 percent of the municipalities which work with either sick leave or attendance. They highlight several reasons for why reducing levels of sick leave is important. Municipalities will save money, but it also improves continuity and leads to a better service for citizens. Reduced absenteeism also has a positive impact on the work-

ing environment and people’s well-being. Earlier research has also shown that employees who are happy with the quality of the services they provide are more likely to stay healthy for longer periods of time.

The interviewees in the different municipalities mention a range of crucial factors for reducing the levels of sick leave – a feeling of belonging, cross-party cooperation, organisation and project leadership, knowledge and the sharing of knowledge, systems and routines, leadership, employees’ culture and involvement. The final report also highlights the importance of analysing how local conditions impact on the levels of sick leave before introducing any measures. There is no single solution for solving the challenge. There are differences in culture and attitude, skills developments differ and so do leadership roles.

“Skills improvement both for leaders and employees and not least attention from the top leadership in the municipality, including the politicians, can change the culture in an organisation” sums up the FAFO report.

Municipalities which have worked with sick leave and attendance have also noticed a change in how sick leave is perceived. “There has been a move from focusing solely on the rights of those on sick leave to also looking at their duties to the workplace.” Sick leave is no longer just something which concerns the person who is ill and their doctor, but also employers, colleagues and users.

## A change from the bottom up

Rather than looking at what causes sick leave, Songdalen chose to try to understand what creates attendance in a workplace. After four years they see that sick leave is down by 40 percent in the working places that took part in the project. Health promoting measures, leadership development through coaching and skills development for employees have



improved the working environment and levels of sick leave have fallen.

Trond Stalsberg Mydland sees many reasons for this progress, but wants to highlight that the change was from the bottom up – it worked because of the employees themselves.

“When employees are given the chance to influence their working environment, they see causes, solutions and attitudes and realise their own importance in it all. They know something about their job and their health, and they often know their colleagues’ situation too.

“They know how they can help each other and which solutions will work both for each individual worker and for the workplace as a whole when someone is ill. They also see that there are pros and cons of being in work when you are ill,” he says.

### **Takes time and courage**

Another success factor is the support from management and good cooperation between union representatives, political leadership and company leadership. The three-partite cooperation is the key to progress, according to Trond Stalsberg Mydland.

“It is a way of approaching the problem together,” he says.

Experience shows that there is no quick fix for improving attendance and reducing levels of sick leave. It takes time and courage. Employers are investing in preventative measures rather than having to deal with the consequences of sick leave. And real efforts are needed, even though in this instance it did not take more than around one working week per employee a year. The important thing is to allow time for reflection.

“In everyday life there is no time to think about your working situation. For this you need your ‘own space’ so that improving the working environment is not limited by not having the time to do it. But if you get that and management is on board, you will see results after a few years,” he says.

Trond Stalsberg Mydland believes the project has become more sustainable because its starting point has been the employees’ own engagement and their proposals for how to improve things, rather than running it as a top down exercise. The resulting knowledge belongs to everyone and does not disappear if there is a change of leadership.

A high level of participation is also a way of taking pressure off the person who is ill. Sometimes sick leave is strictly only a matter for the patient and their doctor, other times sick leave is a result of a range of not always very clear-cut factors. This is where Songdal municipality has wanted to create what Trond Stalsberg Mydland calls a room of opportunity, a way of finding solutions to work-related ill health which benefit the individual worker as well as the workplace as a whole.

“This is knowledge which is relevant to us all – how can you find ways of managing work and health in the most efficient way for me, my colleagues and for the workplace,” says Trond Stalsberg Mydland.

[See all articles in theme](#)



## Job boredom – a taboo subject

There is a lot of talk about burnout in the workplace. But there is not much serious debate about being bored at work. Yet these repetitive, grey days can dramatically influence work capacity and efficiency.

THEME

20.05.2016

TEXT: CARL-GUSTAV LINDÉN

Job boredom is usually treated as a humorous subject; the inspiration behind the Dilbert cartoons or the subject of funny signs above your desk. The synonyms for boredom – disgust, lack of will, lack of interest, sadness, tiredness, apathy, world-weariness, tediousness, – are plentiful and illustrate the plurality of the concept.

Yet the academic world has been less interested. When researchers have been looking at boredom, it has been to focus on monotonous work routines which kill creativity and well-being. It is also quite well known that many of those who complain about a lack of motivation at work and tired routines actually are not very open to accept more challenging tasks.

### **Easily dismissed**

Lotta Harju is a researcher at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health in Helsinki and has spent the past few years studying workplace boredom, for which little empirical research exists. The same goes for work-related feelings in general.

Harju is focusing on high skilled jobs which from the outside at least appear to be stimulating. Dissatisfaction is also a bit of a problem in jobs which have high levels of change, creativity and challenges.

There is no clear definition of the term boredom, and the scale of the problem is easily dismissed. Harju says there is a bit of a taboo around talking about boredom and dissatisfaction, and that people who lose their spark are often seen as lazy. 'Burnout' is more sexy than 'boreout'.

"It is not particularly flattering, and it is more glamorous to suffer a burnout since you have sacrificed yourself on the altar of labour and can be considered to be a real protestant."

### **Reflection**

Lotta Harju says there are different reasons for boredom and they can vary from person to person. Not all boredom is bad, because doing nothing in a cognitively challenging occupation can create space for moments of reflection over problems where the solution can lead to innovation.

"Being bored at work from time to time is common and harmless, as long as it doesn't turn into a permanent condition. Continuously feeling bored is a kind of illness which is often not noticed because you are physically present but psychologically absent."

Harju has identified three types of workplace boredom. The first concerns work which does not live up to the expectations you had. In the absence of challenges, you get stuck in a groove. The other type is characterised by feeling that you can't keep up. The workload is too great or work feels meaningless. The third type of workplace boredom is characterised by a working rhythm which is continuously disrupted, making it impossible to finish tasks in a meaningful way. This could be unnecessary bureaucracy and control, problems with cooperation or with management.

The research shows that people who work with meaningful tasks can also be victims of workplace boredom if they are prevented from doing their work in a way which they themselves feel is the best way. All three types of workplace boredom were linked to the fact that the employee's capacity was not fully explored.

### **Recipe against boredom**

So what is the antidote to boredom? The starting point is that everyone has a need to do things that feel meaningful and which you can be proud of.

"Employers can grant people the freedom to carry out their jobs in the best way they can, and to allow them to plan their work like they want to."

Lotta Harju also encourages organisations to remove all kinds of control which serve no final purpose. Individual workers can also create meaning themselves by keeping a diary of progress and of things which have been moving forwards. Harju herself makes notes every day or several days a week of what she has achieved.

"It is a way of appreciating that things are moving forward, and that not everything is left unfinished."

Research on motivation and boredom gains importance as future workplaces get increasingly automated, leaving people to feel that machines are taking care of everything.

"They are changing the way jobs are being done and the experience of work. This can make work more diverse, when heavy and dangerous routine tasks are being taken over by machines."

Lotta Harju's research is based on interviews with 72 employees and leaders who worked with high-skill and support tasks in different trades. It is part of a larger research and development project run by the Institute of Occupational Health looking at motivation, engagement and boredom at work, called the Spiral of Inspiration. One academic paper based on the research has been published: Harju, Lotta, and Jari Hakanen. "An employee who was not there: a study of job boredom in white-collar work." *Personnel Review* (2016).



## Is precarious work becoming the new norm?

Precarious work is spreading fast. One fifth of the UK workforce is already employed in the sharing economy, made famous by companies like Uber and Airbnb.

NEWS

20.05.2016

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“The greatest danger is that precarious working contracts are becoming legitimised, which means those who refuse to accept such jobs risk losing their social benefits,” warns the British labour law expert Jeremias Prassl from the University of Oxford.

He took part in a two day conference hosted by the Stockholm University’s Institute for Social Private Law in cooperation with a six year long research programme called ReMark-Lab which is now drawing to a close.

The conference sought to explore whether precarious working conditions have become the new norm, and how labour legislation should adapt to this development.

“Don’t believe those who try to make it sound as if app based services like Uber are only there for people to get some extra

income. No, this is about a massive change in the relationship between employee and employer,” says Jeremias Prassl.

The speed of the change is partly hidden because statistics covering the area has not yet been processed, said Claire La Hovary from the University of Glasgow.

“It has long been an aim for the International Labour Organisation to gradually bring people who work in the informal sector, i.e. those with no proper job contracts, into the formal part of the labour market,” she said.

The problem is that even if those who work in the informal sector are being classified as belonging to the ordinary labour market, they earn too little to benefit from it.

“The ordinary labour market is no longer what it used to be,” said Claire La Hovary.

Precarious working conditions often form a triangle where a company links customers with workers via an app. The company will often claim that all they are doing is facilitating contact and that the people who carry out the services cannot be considered to be employees.

“But what Uber’s legal team says is different to what the marketing department says. Because the marketers constantly talk about how many new jobs are being created,” says Jeremias Prassl.

The new jobs lack fundamental rights, however, like work safety and regular working hours.

Professor César Rosado Marzón from the Chicago-Kent College of Law talked a story in the New York Times about a woman working for Starbucks which made customers so upset that they started to boycott the coffee chain. She was forced to get up at five in the morning in order to open a Starbucks café at six. But since there were few customers between nine and noon, she was not allowed to work during those hours. Since her home was far away, she had to spend three hours in a local park before she could return and finish her ten hour working day.

“This has led to campaigns for fair working hours in the USA,” said César Rosado Marzán.

This is where labour law can determine that an agreement between a company and what is called independent employees still can be classified as employment.

“The development of precarious working conditions is in fact not a particularly difficult issue for labour law. Business models can be tricky, but it is relatively easy to determine whether the person who carries out the work really is allowed to decide over her or his own situation, or whether they are being punished if they for instance work for a competitor when the regular company doesn’t offer any work.”

Professor Eberhard Eichenhofer from the Friedrich Schiller University in Germany brought up another aspect. When an employer organises work in a way which means independent ‘micro entrepreneurs’ are performing the services, it also twists competition.

“Companies that still have staff and that pay 40 percent employer’s fees end up being hopelessly undermined,” he said.

At the same time the entire social safety system is being undermined, since taxes fall below what is needed when the number of people on precarious employment conditions rises.

One of the characteristics of the sharing economy is that customers can rate the person providing the service.

“This means that customers’ at times unconscious prejudices are amplified through algorithms. A black person renting out his home through Airbnb makes on average 12 percent less than a white person renting out his home,” says Jeremias Prassl.





Glasgow

## Fighting poverty in EU – a tale of five cities

The European Union made the combat against poverty and social exclusion one of its main goals in 2008. 20 million vulnerable people should be helped to a better life by 2020 in a coordinated effort, according to the European Commission. The main tool would be active inclusion. But it's easier said than done.

NEWS

20.05.2016

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Social policy is something that many member states regard as part of their national authority and sovereignty. The European anti-poverty strategy therefore risks creating tension between the states and the EU, or between local authorities and the state.

"Largely, national governments seem to have turned a deaf ear to the EU's expectations about the high degree of coordination and collaboration between various levels and actors," says Bjørn Hvinden, who is a Professor at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences in Norway.



Together with Associate Professor Rune Halvorsen he has edited a book which summarises the findings a group of researchers from five countries made when they studied how the EU policies to combat poverty worked in five cities: Dortmund (Germany), Turin (Italy), Radom (Poland), Malmö (Sweden) and Glasgow (United Kingdom). The researchers worked within a European Union Seventh Framework project with the acronym “COPE”.

The work of the researchers shows just how bewildering the differences can be. Even if all the cities operate with some kind of minimum income schemes (MIS) the criteria to be eligible for the benefit differs, the funding comes from different sources, the degree of central regulation varies, as well as which public unit is responsible for delivering local benefits. In Dortmund in Germany there are two administrative levels in the local regulation of MIS, the federal and the local level, while in Radom in Poland there are four levels: state, region, poviát and gmina.

In some countries, like Sweden, the municipality plays the most important role:

"Voluntary organisations, charities, churches and private foundations play a minor role in providing services and guidance to the poor. The City of Malmö takes the view that public agencies are the best way to provide welfare and it generally rejects the idea of other actors being involved in the governance of social assistance," writes Max Koch and Alexandru Panican.

In Glasgow the opposite is the case:

"According to recent calculations there are currently 2,300 charities operating in Glasgow. Some of them are involved in the provision of outsourced public services and initiatives, whereas others build on the initiatives of users or local communities."

### Large variations

The launch of the combat against poverty could have come at a more opportune moment. The financial crisis 2008 is partly to blame for the lack of results and made the variations in unemployment even larger, between as well as within the countries. The unemployment rates vary between 30.4 percent in the south of Spain, to 2.5 percent in Salzburg in Austria. A common trait with the five chosen cities is that they are former industrial centres that subsequently had to adapt to “post-Fordist conditions”.

The researchers has not lost the faith in the strategy of active inclusion.

"A challenge with a policy concept like Active Inclusion is that it tends to involve greater public spending in the short term, with the promise of less need for spending in the longer term", says Bjørn Hvinden.

Active inclusion is the main tool in the strategy that the Commission proposed in 2008. In an interview about the project Martin Heidenreich defines active inclusion as:

“the combination of an adequate income support, inclusive labour markets and the access to quality services. Politically, it implies the extension of activation principles to social assistance recipients (long-term unemployed and other groups), who are more distant from the labour market and who are often characterised by multiple employment barriers (such as low qualifications, health problems, alcoholism, addiction etc.). Therefore, a broad array of social, educational, health and rehabilitation services in addition to classic employment measures (such as training and placement and standard income support) is an indispensable element of the strategy.”

- Evidently, there is a substantial group of people with complex challenges related to employment, social participation and well-being who require a combination of different forms of support and assistance, says Bjørn Hvinden.

### Common goals

The European Commission wanted the member states to set common goals for reducing poverty and also to report the progress in National Reform Plans. Matteo Jessoula describes how setting quantitative targets was opposed by several countries, since it had the potential to legitimise stronger European interference in domestic anti-poverty agendas. In three of the countries investigated, Sweden, Germany and the UK, the National Reform Plans did not set targets in accordance with the indicators agreed at the EU level.

The researchers found that the cities where the EU policy worked best was where the issue was not politicised, but mainly handled by the national bureaucracies. In Italy and Poland, national targets were established in accordance with EU indicators, aiming to lift respectively 2.2 and 1.5 million people out of poverty and social exclusion by 2020.

"These also are the two countries, where despite – or possibly because of – the low politicisation of the issue at the early stage, the Europe 2020 strategy apparently produced the most relevant substantive effects," writes Matteo Jessoula.

What about the effect on the local level? Håkan Johansson and Franca Maioa draw this conclusion:

"In sum, the EU has significance for the local actors, though primarily as a source of financial support for local activities. Yet local actors tend to see the European anti-poverty strategy as peripheral to their own policies and work.

"We could say that the local level does not perceive EU as being important for its efforts in combating poverty, while the European level perceives what happens at the local level in Europe as crucial for the EU and its future."



## Åland's Premier Katrin Sjögren: Multi-talented law maker

The Liberal Katrin Sjögren has been the head of Åland's autonomous government since November last year, and the challenges are queuing up. Cuts are needed everywhere, Åland's largest factory is threatened with closure and a high profile wind power project looks set to get blown away.

PORTRAIT

20.05.2016

TEXT: HELENA FORSGÅRD, PHOTO: ROBERT JANSSON

Katrin Sjögren worked as an A&E nurse for many years – in Åland, Sweden and Norway. This prepared her well for politics. You become used to almost constantly being at the centre of the storm and to perform advanced problem solving for big and small issues.

During last October's parliamentary elections she led her party The Liberals for Åland to victory. The party is close to the Swedish People's Party of Finland and the Liberal People's Party in Sweden. The main competitor, Åland Center,

did get the same number of seats, seven out of 30, but the Liberals secured a few more votes.

Katrin Sjögren was therefore tasked with forming a government, and quickly went to work. Soon it was clear she would cooperate with the Social Democrats and the centre-right Moderates, rather than with the Centre party which had been part of Åland's government since the 1970s.

### No free zones

There are seven ministers in today's government.

"You need to be multi-talented in order to manage the job. We all share a secretary but have no staff of our own. When we need to go somewhere, we drive ourselves or cycle – unless it's a special occasion like when the president is visiting."

On the small island of Åland you are always close to the voters and to your political opponents. As *lantråd* – Åland's head of government – you are on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. There are no free zones, not even if you take the dog for a walk or go food shopping. If people have something they want to say, they come and say it.

"This is not a problem for me, quite the opposite. It is good that people approach me, it allows me to explain. It is worse for my family. They think it is hopeless that a short trip on the town might take hours," says Katrin Sjögren, who joined politics for real in 1999 when he was elected a councillor for Mariehamn.



She first joined Åland's parliament in 2003. She has also been a government minister before, spending four years with responsibility for health and environment.

As the Premier she is mainly responsible for the whole government, and not a special area. She must keep the government together, and quotes the Swedish football coach Pia Sundhage;

"My job is to try to make others good. I will listen and coach, rather than forcefully instruct people. But I can certainly make myself heard too, I have a lively temper."

### Chips factory under threat

One issue which has engaged the whole of Åland lately is the threatened closure of the island's largest onshore employer – a factory making chips and frozen potato products. The factory was founded by Ålanders in 1969. It grew and did well and was bought in 2005 by the Norwegian Orkla group. Straight away there were prophecies of doom. Would the factory be closed and production moved to a place where there was no need for ferry transport? Did Orkla feel any social responsibility for Åland?

Things went very well under the Orkla leadership – until the beginning of this year. That is when news of merger talks emerged. More than one hundred jobs were under direct threat and another hundred indirectly; potato farmers and transport workers.

"200 jobs is a lot for Åland. This government has been working hard with this issue. We have been considering various competition measures which would make things easier not only for Orkla, but for other companies operating in Åland. Luckily others are getting involved too, like the municipality where the factory is based, and consumer organisations," says Katrin Sjögren.

Everyone has been waiting for an outcome, and in the middle of May the happy news broke. The factory will remain in Åland and production will carry on as before. The Ålanders' and government's hard work to keep it there is believed to have contributed to Orkla's decision.

### Many eggs in one basket

Statistically Åland is doing well. Very well indeed. In April relative unemployment was 3.5 percent and the population is growing. Many who move to Åland find work in agriculture, a sector dominated by fruit and vegetable cultivation. Åland is not called Finland's apple orchard for nothing.

"Yet one problem is that our labour market is so narrow. A few sectors dominate, especially the marine sector. Many shipping companies, both passenger, tanker and cargo transport, have their headquarters in Åland. Many Ålanders work in the marine sector, and it has created many new companies specialising in everything from offshore electrical systems, fire safety and IT systems. Many operate world wide.

"If the marine sector wobbles, all of Åland shakes. The narrow labour market also means many young people who go to Sweden and Finland to study never return because they can't find their dream job in Åland. But at the autonomous administration we need special skills and can offer a number of jobs," says Katrin Sjögren.

Thanks to its autonomous status, Åland can draft its own laws covering things like business. That, Sjögren says, is a great advantage.

“We can tailor the regulations to suit our needs to a large degree. Ålanders are also good entrepreneurs and good at multi-tasking. I understand that many might think it strange that 29,000 people rule themselves, making their own laws, but so far we have shown that we manage well. Sadly the average Nordic person knows little about Åland. Even many Finnish members of parliament lack knowledge about Åland’s special status,” she says.

Here is a short lecture on Åland’s status: In 1921 the newly founded League of Nations decided that Åland should be an autonomous region of Finland with Swedish as the only language. Leading up to this, a popular movement in Åland had been fighting for the islands to be reunited with Sweden. Finland, which gained independence in 1917, did not want to let go of Åland, so the conflict was solved by the League of Nations. Since then the autonomy has developed, and today Åland can introduce their own legislation covering a range of areas. Customs, border control and the judiciary are areas controlled by the Finnish state.

### **Fewer municipalities?**

Sjögren’s government has included a hot potato in its program – changing Åland’s municipal structure. The island probably holds the Nordic record when it comes to the number of municipalities – one city and 15 rural and coastal municipalities for 29,000 citizens! The city of Mariehamn is the largest with 11,500 people, the island municipality of Sottunga is the smallest with 100 people. A third of them are over 65.

“Many municipalities are not economically sustainable and many would benefit from working together across the borders,” says Sjögren.

But the issue is very sensitive, not least emotionally, and Åland’s other major political party, Åland Center, has forcefully opposed the joining of municipalities. It will be no easy task to force through a change, but the work has begun. In February next year a group will present a report with alternatives for a future structure. One alternative is said to be for Åland to become one single municipality.

Cuts are also needed across the board. The 20 million euro budget deficit is meant to be reduced to zero in the next three years. The health sector is one area which faces cuts.

### **Yes turned to no**

Several major issues on the agenda depend on good relations to the parties in Finland. Among them is a review of the autonomy act and a change to the so-called settlement system or the amount of money which Åland gets back from the Finnish state to cover what the Ålanders pay in state taxes. The ongoing health sector reform in Finland must also be

closely watched, because it will have consequences for collection of municipal taxes also in Åland.

Last but not least there is the wind power subsidy. It is windy in Åland and private investors were ready to launch a new major project with several wind turbines. But then the state changed its mind. From saying yes to a national subsidy, which had been met with much cheer in Åland, the answer was now suddenly no.

“That was really damaging to relations. But we must carry on and look to the future. High on the agenda are environmental measures and the Baltic Sea,” says Katrin Sjögren.

### **No free ownership**

Åland plays by its own special rules, and was allowed to keep these when Finland joined the EU. In order to own land in an unregulated area, for instance on a small island, you need to have what is called Right of Domicile in Åland – a kind of simplified citizenship which you can acquire if you have lived there for five years, is a Finnish citizen and can speak Swedish.

This has in turn led to quite a few constructions which has made it possible for people with no Right of Domicile to access attractive seaside plots.

“We have said that we want to explore whether you can modernise the right to buy land and clarify the regulations. But we don’t want to open up to complete free ownership, because that could lead to Åland turning into a summer camp for people with money,” Katrin Sjögren.

### **Cold head, warm heart**

Katrin Sjögren used to work as an A&E nurse. That prepared her for a life in politics.

“You need to keep your head cold and your heart warm. And for your own sake you need to come to terms with the fact that politics has its ups and downs. I am in the top position right now, and try to do my best. If it’s not good enough it’s not good enough. Then someone else will come and take over,” she says.