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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Björn Lindahl

EMAIL

nljeditor@gmail.com

WEB

www.nordiclabourjournal.org

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Editorial: The proof is in the pudding

Social sustainability must become as obvious as a sustainable climate or environment, says Hillevi Engström, Sweden's Minister of Labour. Like her Nordic colleagues she has a drive to open up the labour market for people with disabilities.

COMMENTS

12.12.2011

BERIT KVAM

Despite the crisis and a fear of rising unemployment, the Nordic countries are intensifying their efforts so that more people with disabilities are admitted into ordinary working life. Hopefully this should open the doors for many more in the future - as Lars Anderson says: "Getting a job has given me a new life and I now hope that more people with disabilities get the same chance as me."

Letting more people into ordinary working life was top of the agenda when the Nordic labour ministers met in Finland recently. Also joining the debate were employers' representatives, the Council of Nordic Trade Unions and the Nordic Council on Disability. Now the challenge is to get employers to agree it is a good idea to hire people with disabilities. Our theme this month is about strategies and measures which can contribute to social sustainability by giving people with reduced work abilities the chance of finding a job.

Loa Brynjulfsdottir is the newly elected general secretary at the Council of Nordic Trade Unions, a cooperation of 16 national trade unions representing more than nine million members in the Nordic region. We have given her a voice in the Portrait.

Loa Brynjulfsdottir belongs to a generation which moves freely between the Nordic countries, often facing border obstacles. She wants to spend her energy doing something about this, also when it comes to border obstacles which make it harder for people with disabilities to move between countries. We met her at a conference where the costs of border obstacles were presented.

The work to remove border obstacles continues during the Norwegian presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2012. The programme also covers an inclusive working life and the centrally led adaptation of working life for weaker groups in society. Broad participation is a key factor of the Nordic welfare states.

Senior officer Sari Loijas at the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health has been working for a long time to make sure people with disabilities who cannot compete on level terms with other workers get the chance to enter the labour market. She now sees a new drive in this work as more parties get involved. But the proof is in the pudding. Sari Loijas is visually impaired and uses a guide dog. There is not a lack of legislation, she says, but a lack of action.



Finnish Minister of Labour Lauri Ihalainen chaired the Nordic ministers' meeting

Nordic ministers want a more open working life

How do you open up the labour market for more people with disabilities? It is a hot topic. Despite crisis and unemployment taking hold, labour ministers keep their strategic focus on mobilising more people to join working life. They highlight the long-term need for labour and that all have the right to be fully part of working and social life. The challenge is to get working life partners to back their initiatives.

THEME

12.12.2011

TEXT: BERIT KVAM, PHOTO: EVA PERSSON

“Now we just need to make it happen.”

Robert Arnkil and his colleagues from Tampere University have mapped the ‘Strategies and measures to improve the prerequisites for employment among people with disabilities’ on commission from the Finnish Ministry of Labour. The report formed the basis of discussions when the Nordic labour ministers met recently in Helsinki. The social partners and disability organisations were also present.

“We know what good practice is. The same criteria for success apply to people with disabilities as for others,” Robert Arnkil points out.



“We need an individualised service which is tailored and adapted to people’s life situation, we need to listen to the customer and the customer must be an active participant in programs and solutions, workplace training must be organised in cooperation with the employer and other actors. If necessary, chosen solutions must be supported by a personal assistant, coach and other network resources which can help adapt the workplace and help change attitudes. Permanent solutions should be supported, be followed up and adapted as needed.”

While we constantly challenge the limits for what is medically and technologically possible and are able to offer people good health and functionality to a far larger extent than before, old prejudices often prevail, Robert Arnkil points out.

“Working life also faces another challenge - to handle physical, psychological and social problems that aren’t necessarily long term or permanently limiting a person’s abilities but which can occur periodically.”

Into work as fast as possible

Arnkil has found that hiring people with disabilities is considered the largest and most difficult strategic challenge for labour market, health and social policies in the Nordic countries as well as in the UK, Germany, France and Holland. To improve access to the labour market you need to integrate the three policy and service areas. Another common trait is the change in the way these challenges are confronted.

“Traditionally the thinking has been that people need to go through a process of training, rehabilitation and qualification before they can find a job. This has proven not to be enough because people rarely move from the institution which is meant to train them into a job in the ordinary labour market. The best solutions are solutions within ordinary working life,” says Arnkil.

“It seems the best results are achieved when you get a normal employment situation in ordinary working life as quickly as possible. After that it is necessary to support this employ-

ment in various ways to make sure it works. To make it work you need to see some changes in working life and in workplace culture.”

Arnkil also thinks employment services need to improve when it comes to offering jobs to people with disabilities.

“The channelling of clients which we see today where people without disabilities get help first shows that employment services must change the way they view people with disabilities.”

The report’s conclusions

Robert Arnkil and his colleagues’ report shows how the countries share challenges and a strategic focus but that they have different service structures.

“The most important thing is to look at what a person can do and not what a person cannot do,” said Finland’s Minister of Labour Lauri Ihalainen.

There are also other similarities to be found between the countries, such as:

- Labour market, social and health policies are integrated in a new way.
- Good service for people with disabilities is considered to be the same as good service for all.
- The aim is to get people with disabilities into ordinary working life as soon as possible. This solution will then be supported through various measures at a later stage.
- There is a need to develop attitudes, workplace culture and skills to help improve the understanding of what resources are available to the labour market.
- Finally, it is important to mobilise all resources at the same time - those of the customers as well as the service network.

While Denmark’s new government has only had time to announce in its programme its ideas in this field, Finland’s new government and Iceland’s new Ministry for Welfare have already begun looking at new plans of action. Norway will be implementing a new employment strategy for people with disabilities from 2012, while Sweden is into a five-year campaign to improve employment for people with reduced work ability.

Crucial wage subsidies

Minister of Labour Lauri Ihalainen’s new plan of action aims to influence employers’ will to hire people with disabilities. Wage subsidies will be central to this. It is also important to get rid of prejudices in working life, he said.

“Securing access to the labour market for more people is also about equality,” Lauri Ihalainen pointed out.

Social responsibility a trend

“It is important that all citizens get the chance to contribute actively to society” reads the new Danish government’s programme. It announces reforms of cash aid, early retirement,

flexjobs and special measures for people who find themselves far removed from the labour market.

The government is ultimately responsible for the policy while execution rests with the municipalities. The municipal job centres are responsible for getting everyone jobs, said Bo Smith, permanent secretary at the Ministry of Labour.



“The previous government initiated a campaign together with the Disabled Peoples Organisation Denmark with the aim of establishing a knowledge bank which job centres can use. The strategy ‘Disability and job - it can be done!’ is also about encouraging people with disabilities themselves to do more to find jobs.

“The philosophy behind this is that it is best for people with disabilities to get into ordinary working life, not to work in special workplaces. We need to compensate for the solution which is found.

“Corporate social responsibility also opens up for changing attitudes within companies,” said Bo Smith, who explained how being socially responsible has become a trend with Danish companies.

New plans afoot

As Iceland got its new Ministry of Welfare on 1 January, the responsibility for people with disabilities moved to the municipalities.

“This entire field is being reorganised. We have a committee which will suggest solutions at the beginning of next year. We want people with disabilities to find jobs through the public employment service,” said Iceland’s representative, senior advisor Inge Valur Jóhannsson.

People pushed out by tougher working life

“The worse the state of the labour market, the harder it is for this group to find jobs. Groups in need of support are being pushed out of working life. If we are to combine a tougher working life with getting this group into jobs we need to make clear political choices. This is the political challenge we are facing,” said Norway’s Minister of Labour Hanne Bjurstrøm when she met her Nordic colleagues.



She also said that while the main goal was to integrate people with disabilities into ordinary working life as quickly as possible, this might not suit everyone.

She did not want to accept employers’ demands to be able to offer temporary jobs for this group of people.

“This government does not want to do that,” said Hanne Bjurstrøm.

Polls show some 78,000 people with disabilities in Norway are looking for jobs. The government launches a new employment strategy from 2012 for people with disabilities who are younger than 30, with the aim of securing a smoother transition from education to work. Any extra cost or loss of production will be covered for companies which hire young people with disabilities.

Employers must be willing

Sweden’s Minister of Labour Hillevi Engström shared the Norwegian concern:



“Employers must be willing to take on people with reduced work abilities for this to succeed.”

Hillevi Engström also highlighted how the social partners must take responsibility and what the authorities could do.

“Too few employers are taking on people with disabilities. We are reassessing the kind of support we are offering and we have a five year plan in Sweden to improve the situation.

“The greatest obstacle is attitudes and considerations. When it comes to attitudes we are talking about employers and employees. We are trying to coach within working life to support both employees and employers,” she said.

A need for creative leadership

In Finland there will soon be 20,000 people every year on disability pensions, many of them because of depression. These are people who aren’t fully employable but who might be able to work a little and thus prolong their working life.

“But many who can work a little can’t find a place in working life. You need special measures to make that happen, and that is our starting point,” said Lauri Ihalainen.

The government’s new employment programme aims to improve cooperation between ministries and the disability administration.

“We already have the tools which for instance can help people who are difficult to employ find third sector jobs. But we must also look at working life,” said Lauri Ihalainen.

“It is difficult to change attitudes in the workplace. You need creative leadership.

“When working life is running at full tilt you don’t have room for those who aren’t running at full tilt. So what can be done when it comes to working life? Support for people with disabilities is dependent on cooperation between all parties,”

said Lauri Ihalainen and challenged the invited parties to voice their opinions to the ministers.



Mikko Räsänen, a specialist at the Confederation of Finnish Industries (EK), and a board member with a foundation which works to employ more people with disabilities, underlined he was not talking on behalf of other employers’ organisations in the Nordic region.

Where are the jobs for those who can work 40 percent?

“This is a very topical question,” said Mikko Räsänen.

He identified the salary system as one obstacle to employing people with reduced work ability, and felt wage subsidies to be a good measure, and that more flexibility in the way unemployment benefits are paid out could allow for a three month trial period of someone’s ability to work before an employer decided on further employment. On changing attitudes, he wanted to see a better spread of information in cooperation with disability organisations.

Loa Brynjulfsdottir, newly elected general secretary at the Council of Nordic Trade Unions (above, left) said her organisation would have special focus on the Nordic region in the years to come and hoped for good cooperation to protect the Nordic collective agreement model.

She said the trade unions were interested in creating a more open working life with space for everyone.

“Everyone must be given the chance to contribute with their skills in working life on their own terms, both the young, the old, immigrants and people with disabilities. It is only fair that all have the same chance to take part in working life. It is a human right for all to be able to take part in society, and when as many as possible take part in working life it has great social benefits,” said Loa Brynjulfsdottir.

She was particularly focused on border obstacles in the Nordic region, a hindrance to mobility between the countries. This hit people with disabilities particularly hard, she said.

“Border obstacles don’t only hinder mobility, but they rob people with disabilities of their right to be part of a common Nordic labour market,” said Loa Brynjulfsdottir.

From three to four parties

Tone Mørk, head of the Nordic Council on Disability (NHR), also wanted to see more cooperation. She encouraged the ministers to include disability organisations in their work to increase employment among people with disabilities.

“There is no lack of plans, the challenge is to put these plans into action,” she said, and pointed to several areas where more needed to be done.

“We need more skills and more adapted workplaces. More focus on welfare technology and universal access. We need a change in attitudes and more cooperation between different authorities. We need to spread the good examples and to learn from each other’s experience.”

She felt the user groups should be part of this work. NHH wants to focus on ways to improve the transition from school to working life. They want to focus on measures which target employers and want the Nordic tri-partite cooperation to expand into becoming a four-party cooperation. The Nordic Council on Disability’s programme also states that they want to coordinate evidence-based Nordic knowledge.



Disability a hindrance also to the labour market

Despite all ambitious attempts at getting people with disabilities into the Finnish labour market the sad truth is that they are being discriminated against. Now the government is making new efforts to give them a better chance.

THEME

12.12.2011

TEXT: CARL-GUSTAV LINDÉN, HELSINKI

Finland's unemployment statistics for people with disabilities does not make for happy reading. As the economic crisis comes knocking there follows an all too familiar pattern. Exposed groups in society are the first to get a taste of the rough climate. And when the economy bounces back, they are the last to benefit.

Senior officer Sari Loijas at the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in Helsinki has for many years been working to help those who cannot compete on level terms get into the labour market. The new government has improved on their programme and is now working to find new solu-

tions for more working groups. Her own ministry is joined in this work by trade unions, employers, disability organisations, the Social Insurance Institution of Finland and the Ministry of Employment and the Economy.

Loijas, who herself has poor eyesight and uses a guide dog, says there is nothing inherently wrong with the present legislation, but that problems arise when laws are interpreted and put into practice.

"The laws aren't interpreted positively enough from a disabled person's point of view."

One example is the many people with permanent disabilities who in principle are entitled to continuing wage subsidies, yet it is still divided into periods and must be reapplied for.

Problematic terminology

Terminology is another problem. Just like many other countries, Finland is trying to find other words for disabilities and functional impairments because it is a label which easily can be discriminatory.

Functional impairment can be used to describe anything from nickel or dust allergies to paralysis. In other words, it comprises both environmental limits to people's actions and physical disabilities.

"The terms label people and do not make it easier for people to enter the labour market," says Loijas.

Senior advisor Patrik Kuusinen at the the Ministry of Employment and the Economy points out that ILO convention 159 says a disability does not mean a person's working ability is reduced, but that injuries and handicaps reduce the chance of finding a job.

The idea is to remove the term disability from legislation on labour services by 2013.

Kuusinen says the ministry's plan of action has three strands. The first looks at demand and which mechanisms or services will increase employers' interest in hiring staff. There is a need to find a different label than 'part-time work' for those who work slower than others.

The second strand looks at offers and services which improve the chances of partially able-bodied people to find work.

The third looks at how labour and social legislation can be made to work better in tandem.

Ideas put immediately into practice

The work with this programme of action differs from the normal way in which administrative reforms are made. Rather than presenting a white paper which later results in new legislation, the members will come up with ideas for improvements which can be put into practice immediately.

"Measures can be implemented as soon as an idea is born. It is nice to think that the result will arrive gradually," says Patrik Kuusinen.

Heikki Suopohja, managing director at the foundation S. and A. Bovelius which organises vocational training for people with disabilities, welcomes all new attempts at improving access to the labour market. He points out how Finnish society is dividing people into two groups - those who can work at full capacity and those who can't.

Just a few years ago it was common for people with disabilities to be forced into accepting a disability pension. This,

he thinks, is a complete waste of resources. There should be room for solutions where people can get an education and take part in working life on terms which are defined by their own capacity rather than the accepted norm.



“Social sustainability should be as obvious as climate and environmental sustainability,” says Sweden’s Minister of Labour Hillevi Engström, who met Lars Andersson at his workplace at Max - a job which had great consequences for him

Working life’s hidden power

It is difficult for people with disabilities in Sweden to find jobs, and unemployment is considerably higher among people in this group compared to the rest of the labour force. Faced with a shrinking workforce, there’s a need to get as many as possible into work. The fight to secure the right to work for people with disabilities has become a way to work for social sustainability.

THEME

12.12.2011

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO:

If someone had told Lars Andersson from Piteå six years ago that he would be speaking in front of 400 people at a conference in Halmstad, that he would give a lecture in Brussels and that he would be meeting two labour market ministers, he probably would not have believed it.

Six years ago he was 32 and had never been in work apart from a few brief internships. Diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD he found it hard to get work. But at the same time changes were taking place in his surroundings which would also affect him.

The hamburger chain Max had started thinking in new ways about who they would hire as hosts. These are the people who work out front in the actual restaurants and who make sure tables are cleaned and that the restaurants look nice. Max saw that for many people this was a very temporary job and they had trouble recruiting new workers. They started looking for people who fit the job and got in touch with Samhall - a state-owned company assigned to provide meaningful work for people with disabilities. Now they employ 150 people with various degrees of psychological disabilities.

“Having a disability doesn’t disqualify you from all kinds of jobs. We choose to look at their ability to work and believe in what they can do,” says Pär Larshans, director of sustainability at Max hamburger restaurants.

Best newcomer

Lars Andersson was one of those who started work as a serving host at Max with help from Samhall, and it was the start of an adventure which has taken him to auditoriums both in Sweden and abroad. Lars Andersson has also been questioning politicians during the annual Almedalen week, a forum for politicians and others held in Visby on the Swedish island of Gotland, on what they do to help people with disabilities find work. He was recently crowned by magazine Shortcut the 23rd most important newcomer among Swedish entrepreneurs, business leaders and politicians. Lars Andersson is happy with this.

“It’s an opportunity which has given me a new life and I now hope that more people with disabilities get the same chance as me,” says Lars Andersson.

When Lars Andersson opens his heart and talks about what the job means to him when it comes to feeling worthy, being able to contribute and what it means to be seen for what you can do, something happens to his audience says Pär Larshans.

Anyone could be hit

We meet on 30 November at the Rival cinema in central Stockholm. The ‘Show the Way’ seminar starts in less than an hour, organised by Samhall. One employer and one ‘trailblazer’ (someone who has shown outstanding commitment) among six nominees will be awarded for their work or for their efforts to help get people with disabilities into the labour market. 600 guests are rushing in and there’s a premiere-like mood. Judging from the list of speakers there is real commitment to give more people with disabilities the chance to enter working life. A string of well-known Swedes are about to enter the stage, among them last year’s trailblazer Carin Götblad who is Stockholm’s County Police Commissioner, business leader Carl Bennet and president and CEO of the ICA group Kenneth Bengtsson.

This year Henrik Lindstedt at Panduro Hobby in Malmö was named trailblazer of the year and Sweprod AB became employer of the year.

One of the speakers is Minister of Labour Hillevi Engström, who reminds people that anyone could be hit by illness or an accident resulting in a disability. She therefore encouraged all businesses and public representatives to take part and help. It is not enough that only five percent of people leave Samhall to find other jobs.

“This is about assessment, attitudes and leaders who have made their minds up. We need to make the important things happen. If I want to achieve anything during my spell as minister of labour it is to make social sustainability as natural as climate and environmental sustainability,” said Hillevi Engström.

“See the power”

So far state authorities and the public sector have not been particularly good at hiring people with disabilities. There is a certain reluctance according to new research carried out by weekly business journal Veckans affärer and the Swedish Organisation for Managers. Out of all the seven areas of discrimination which exists today, 1,200 employers said disabilities was the hardest one to handle. But now the government wants to stimulate more to take the right step.

Minister of Labour Hillevi Engström announced that the government will increase its budget allocation, making it possible to receive 100,000 kronor (€11,000) per workplace and per worker to help with the necessary adjustments. The government has also asked the employment service to help make employers interested in taking on more people with disabilities. As a result the employment service has been running the campaign ‘See the Power’ since September.

Pär Larshans is part of the jury that chooses the winners of the ‘Show the Way’ award. Max had been working actively to hire people with disabilities and won the prize themselves two years ago. Max, Sweden’s oldest hamburger chain, employed 3,000 people in 2010, ran 79 restaurants and had a turnover of 1,250m kronor (€138m). The business is wholly family-owned and sons Rickard and Cristoffer Bergfors are president and vice president. They work with both environmental and social sustainability and the drive to get serving hosts jobs for people with disabilities is part of this work. They told the seminar that they’d entered an agreement with Samhall to take on a further 300 people with disabilities.

“For us this is a way of recruiting for positions which we could not fill, but it has been necessary to address our own prejudices. Prejudices represent the largest obstacle. At the same time it is important to point out this is not done out of charity but it is a strategic, long-term drive to be able to face the future competition over labour,” says Pär Larshans.

Leading by example

Max leads by example and takes one step at the time. No boss is required to hire people with disabilities, but the hope is that all of them will be motivated by looking at the good examples. There has also been help from Samhall and there is

work being done on leadership training courses to change attitudes and educate people.

If you are to work with psychological disabilities like Aspergers or ADHD you need clear routines and instructions. Restaurant heads have also had access to Samhall personnel. The positive experiences have led to the extra 300 people which will now be employed by Max. There are several reasons for why this has worked so well, thinks Pär Larshans. One is the systematic and long-term training of leaders. Another is the support from the company owners.

“Without the owners’ will and praise this would not have worked,” he says.

When the family business leaders Rickard and Cristoffer Bergfors enter the stage at the ‘Show the Way’ seminar they also talk about the commercial advantages of thinking social sustainability by hiring people with disabilities.

“The atmosphere has improved and the running of the business works better. We have also received a lot of attention, which is good for our brand. Being both environmentally and socially responsible is a natural part of running a modern business,” both brothers say.



Anders Hostrup's workplace Tagarno in Horsens develops and sells cutting edge camera solutions for people with impaired vision and learning difficulties

Focus on the working ability of people with disabilities

A new Danish campaign aims to get more people with disabilities into work by getting job centres, businesses and people with disabilities themselves to look for opportunities rather than obstacles.

THEME

12.12.2011

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER. PHOTO: OPEN

When Anders Hostrup started his job as head of sales with Tagarno, his boss made a point of saying he had not been hired because he had serious visual impairment. He got the

job because he had the right mix of qualifications though his education in pedagogics, his long experience as a leader and

because his eyesight was weak. Anders Hostrup greatly appreciates this approach:

“There’s no reason for feeling sorry for me because I carry a white cane and need a special reading aid to read the paper. And I am very happy the company didn’t hire me because they wanted to be able to show they take social responsibility, but because my experience in pedagogic and as a leader and my reduced vision are all skills which are good for my job,” he says.

His workplace, Tagarno in Horsens, develops and sells cutting edge camera solutions for people with reduced vision and reading abilities, which includes the medical industry. As head of sales for Denmark, Sweden and Finland, Anders Hostrup entertains quite a few customers and uses advanced IT programs, some of which cannot be operated by people with reduced vision. That’s why the local job centre have allocated a personal assistant which will perform the tasks which 45 year old Anders Hostrup’s reduced vision stops him from doing himself.

Many prejudices

Tagarno routinely puts their employees’ skills centre stage - not their disability, if they have one. As a result the company perfectly fits the objectives of the present Danish campaign to get more people with disabilities into work, ‘Seek a job - focus on skills’. The campaign was initiated in May by the previous Danish government. It is being run by the Ministry of Labour, the Disabled Peoples Organisation Denmark and two business networks, VFSA and Vinsa.

When the campaign ends in May next year the aim is for it to have made both job centres, people with disabilities and businesses focus more on the skills rather than on the disability when it comes to a person’s chance of finding a job, says project leader Søren Kjær Nielsen.

“We still have prejudices or lack of knowledge when it comes to people with disabilities and work, and this is quite annoying because many businesses, job centres and people with disabilities are fighting for this to succeed. The campaign’s aim is therefore to create more awareness of the possibilities which exist, and there are actually quite a lot of them,” says Søren Kjær Nielsen.

Sowing a seed

The campaign has three focus areas:

- To get more people with disabilities to apply for jobs despite their disability. This happens through inspirational meetings about job seeking and with businesses organising open house events.
- To improve awareness with job centre employees of the possibilities they have to help people with disabilities get jobs with the businesses.

- To motivate businesses to focus more on skills and less on disabilities when they get job applications from people with disabilities.

The campaign’s aim is to change perceptions - not to create a certain number of jobs. The effect is hard to measure at this stage, says project leader Søren Kjær Nielsen. But he is convinced the initiative will make a real difference in the long run:

“We are not so naive as to believe this will create 5,000 new jobs for people with disabilities. But there is no doubt we are sowing an important seed by improving the awareness of all parties when it comes to focussing on skills and potential rather than on disabilities, and that there are many kinds of support which can help the labour market to benefit from these resources.”

There are equally optimistic noises from the job centre in Horsens, where Svend Erik Langberg and Dorrit Due play key roles when it comes to disabilities.

“We’ve become pretty busy treating and approving applications for compensatory measures for people with disabilities after all the job centre’s advisors and cooperating partners have become more aware of the support which is available for people with disabilities to help them find or keep jobs both on ordinary terms or in flexjobs or through other offers,” says Svend Erik Langberg.

The job centre should explore all possibilities for ordinary employment with compensatory measures for disability before it considers rehabilitation or employment with extra support in the shape of a flexjob.

Many support opportunities

Svend Erik Langberg and Dorrit Due mostly help people with disabilities by making relevant aids available in their workplace, and by helping to adapt the workplace to meet their needs.

The job centre also supplies personal assistance to people with disabilities. Within two years of ending their education, newly educated people with disabilities can also apply for a special wage subsidy which lasts for one year. It is called the Ice Breaker. Danish law also secures all people with disabilities the chance to enjoy positive discrimination when applying for jobs in the public sector, e.g. taxi rides to make sure people with disabilities who have applied for certain jobs within the public sector arrive in time for their interview.

The various compensatory measures for people with disabilities are not mutually exclusive. The same person can be awarded both workplace adaptation, aids, personal assistance and more.

“The measures will be tailored to the individual’s need so that he or she can get a job or keep a job,” says Svend Erik Langberg.

Both Svend Erik Langberg and Anders Hostrup were speakers during the conference ‘See skills, not disabilities’ on 6 December 2011 at Danish Crown in Horsens - a company which has benefited from hiring people with hearing loss. The conference was organised by the business network Vinsa, which aims to inspire and support businesses that want to work actively to further social responsibility and roominess in Danish workplaces.



Loa Brynjulfsdottir wants to defend the collective agreement model

Loa Brynjulfsdottir is the new general secretary at the Council of Nordic Trade Unions, NFS. Her top priority is to further defend the Nordic collective agreement model. It is under pressure from the more regulations-based way in which labour market issues are dealt with within the EU.

PORTRAIT

12.12.2011

BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: EMIL HAMLIN

“I don’t understand why the Nordic ministers don’t stand up to defend the collective agreement model more. It is an incredibly flexible way to meet the challenges of globalisation and to strengthen competitiveness,” she says.

Loa Brynjulfsdottir was unanimously elected NFS general secretary on 16 November this year. She is the first woman and the first Iclander to serve in that post. NFS was founded in 1972 and is an umbrella organisation for 16 national trade

unions in the Nordic region. The organisation represents more than nine million union members and works to promote union cooperation in the Nordic region, the Baltic Sea region and in Europe.

Her main strength is precisely the relationship between the Nordic region and the EU when it comes to working life. She worked with labour life cooperation within the EEA at Efta's administration in Brussels, where Norway and Iceland also take part, before working for nearly five years as an EU expert at the NFS. She then went to work for the Swedish Confederation for Professional Employees (TCO) before becoming acting general secretary at the NFS this summer.

"Within the EU it is common to have statutory minimum wages and other state directives covering the labour market. But the best agreements are those that are made within one trade by those who are directly affected," she says.

Not easy to defend collective agreements

It is not easy to defend the collective agreements within the EU, however, especially now when European minimum wages are up for debate as part of the package of new fiscal rules.

"20 out of the 27 countries have introduced statutory minimum wages. Outside of the Nordic region only Germany, Austria, Italy and Cyprus do not have them.

"It can be difficult to explain why we don't want to have more state or European interference in how we agree on wages. One Rumanian I met told me: 'Why won't you just let us have our minimum wage?'. The fact is we are not against other countries having it on a national level if it fits their own model," she says.

Another problem is the lack of an employer organisation counterpart to the NFS. When you want to talk highly about the three-partite cooperation between trade unions, employers and Nordic governments it is, of course, a little bit strange not to have a Nordic employers' organisation.

"We would like such an organisation to exist," says Loa Brynjulfsdottir.

Despite the fact that the EU will continue to be one of the main decision makers also on the Nordic labour markets, Loa Brynjulfsdottir wants to make the NFS even more Nordic.

"I feel we've been loosing the Nordic link in recent years. Questions which we are working with as part of the Baltic Sea cooperation, the EU and globally are also very relevant to the Nordic cooperation."

But the slightly smaller circle of Nordic countries which are particularly close also have a lot to learn from each other. Loa Brynjulfsdottir is well qualified here too. We meet in Sweden's parliament during a conference on border obstacles.

Always Nordic

"I have always been very engaged in Nordic issues, politically and with trade unions. I was born in Reykjavik in Iceland but lived in Bergen in Norway for many years when I was a child. I then worked as a Nordjobbare [a summer job scheme for young people who want to work in a different Nordic country] in Tampere in Finland, putting ginger bread cakes in boxes. We sat on old beer crates and were called piipari pakkari, if I remember correctly. Later I was also a Nordjobbare on the Faroe Islands. Then I studied in Uppsala in Sweden while the rest of my family lived in Copenhagen. Later it has been Brussels and Iceland and now the NFS in Stockholm.

"Perhaps you've seen the Nordic pamphlet on Jyrki and Jóhanna which illustrates the problems facing a couple moving between the different Nordic countries? They could have made a pamphlet on me: 'Loa bumming around the Nordic region'," she jokes.

The movement of labour is the other major issue for the NFS, aside from defending the collective agreement model. The third big question is green jobs.

"I have experienced many border obstacles myself - but none which have been impossible to solve. But out of all the issues we work with, the border obstacles do create the strongest emotions."

It becomes very tangible:

"What happens with the Icelandic nursery school teacher who moves to Sweden? People expect this to work and still they face many problems. The fear of things not working out is in itself a border obstacle, because people don't dare to move."

The three worst border obstacles

While the Nordic Council of Ministers has made its list of 36 border obstacles, Loa has made her own 'bottom three list' of the three areas which she feels represent the worst border obstacles.

"Top of my list, or perhaps I should say bottom of my list, is the problems with unemployment benefits when you move between the Nordic countries. The very strict rules covering unemployment benefit funds create big problems. If you don't sign up with the employment service as soon as you move to Sweden, for instance, you risk falling outside of the system completely.

"Another problem is the E301 form issued by Norwegian NAV (The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration), which you need to get unemployment benefits in Sweden. It can take 25 to 30 weeks [to process].

"Next to the bottom but one is tax legislation and in third place is the fact that it is impossible to get rehabilitation in a

different country from the one a person was working in when he or she was injured at work or fell ill.

“For a Swede who worked in Denmark but commuted from Sweden, having to travel to receive the benefit can become a major strain, when it could all have happened in the person’s home municipality,” says Loa Brynjulfsdottir.

Started green online shop

Loa Brynjulfsdottir shows a more than average commitment also to the third issue awaiting her during her four years as general secretary - green jobs. While on maternal leave in 2008 she set up the online store Ecoloco.

She says the idea came when she wanted to buy a bodysuit for her newborn son. The instructions said to wash it three times before use. This turned out to be because of toxins in cotton clothes.

“After that I only wanted to buy organic clothes. To make one kilo of cotton they use one kilo of chemicals. It felt grotesque.

“My driving force is and always was to help make the world a better place both for people and for the environment. Ecoloco was one way of helping first and foremost parents of young children to live a little bit greener while contributing to improving working conditions in the dodgy clothing industry.”

Changing the way the NFS works

There have also been changes to how the NFS works, in order to better approach the three major issues which the organisation now is concentrating on.

“Instead of working geographically, we will organise around the issue at hand, because all the issues we work with are wide-ranging,” she says.

The NFS has four full-time employees. In addition to the new general secretary, the organisation has also employed two new administrators this autumn: Maria Noleryd (Sweden), and Mika Domisch (Finland). The last cog in the wheel is Eva Carp, who is responsible for finances and administration at the NFS secretariat. She also represents the continuity which the organisation needs.

Nordic cooperation for 2012 focuses on broad participation

The welfare state in a Nordic perspective is the theme for Norway's 2012 presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers. One priority will be the inclusion of exposed social groups in the labour market. The social partners will be important contributors during the presidency.

NEWS

12.12.2011

TEXT: BERIT KVAM, PHOTO: EVA PERSSON

The Nordic welfare states are known for their high level of welfare and equality combined with strong competitiveness and the ability to change. Maintaining and developing the Nordic welfare societies is an important goal for the Nordic cooperation. This also includes the cooperation between the public sector and the social partners, as well as voluntary sector organisations and others, in order to reach widely acceptable joint solutions to the challenges faced, reads the chapter on working life in the programme for the presidency.

One of the aims of the 2012 programme is to help mobilise and include more people in a long and health-promoting working life, and to exchange experiences between the Nordic countries in order to find good solutions.

"The Nordic welfare states build on the idea that high rates of employment is the best way to generate wealth and provide welfare." This is another quote from the presidency programme, which goes on to highlight one of the Nordic countries' great challenges: that many face social exclusion and many do not find their feet in the labour market. An important part of labour market policies is therefore an including working life with working conditions and work environments which contribute to good health and working ability, and which prevent social exclusion.

In order to pave the way for broad participation in working life, the Norwegian presidency focuses closely on exposed groups like people on long-term sick leave and people with disabilities. There will be extra focus on helping to open up the labour market to young people with disabilities. The presidency will host a conference to look at how experiences are shared when it comes to which measures work best to secure social inclusion and to prevent social exclusion of vulnerable groups in society.

2012 is the EU's year for active ageing. The Nordic cooperation will focus on older people's participation in working life.

The Norwegian presidency promises to organise a Nordic conference to help contribute to the exchange of knowledge in this area.

Removing and preventing border obstacles which hinder free movement between the Nordic countries has been part of the programme more or less constantly since the Nordic region began cooperating on cross-border movement. A detailed report on social and labour market related border obstacles will be presented in spring 2012. This should encourage the countries to further discuss the challenges and to find concrete solutions. A conference on the removal of border obstacles will also be held.

The 2012 Norwegian presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers will focus closely on the cooperation with the social partners. The presidency will invite the parties to help highlight the role they do play and could play in the development of labour market policy and welfare policy solutions.



The Nordic region is more integrated than other comparable European regions - except from when it comes to the trading of goods, according to a report on the costs of border obstacles

What do border obstacles cost the Nordic region?

Is it possible to calculate how much the Nordic countries are losing because of the many remaining border obstacles affecting the labour market? According to Copenhagen Economics no border obstacles would mean 3,000 to 6,000 more cross-border commuters. If all of them came out of unemployment it would save 4.2bn Danish kroner (€56m).

NEWS

12.12.2011

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The report was presented at a conference on border obstacles held at the Swedish parliament in Stockholm on 30 November. Among the participants were two Nordic ministers, the Forum on Border Obstacles and a range of organisations which are working with the issue.

Copenhagen Economics is a counselling agency staffed by economists specialising in advising businesses, authorities and politicians on issues where the market meets regulations. Their chosen method to analyse the problem is the same which is being used within the EU to compare how well different regions are functioning.

The conclusions drawn for the Nordic region, however, are based on a very limited selection and do not consider, for instance, whether a cross-border commuter from one country will be taking the job from a citizen of the country he or she commutes to.

Already well integrated

Copenhagen Economics quickly establishes that the Nordic region already is one of the best integrated regions in Europe. The cross-border proportion is greater in the Nordic region than in other European regions both when it comes to convenience retail and investment.

Comparisons are made with Great Britain/Ireland, the so-called SaarLorLux Rheinland/Pfalz region and the Alps region which comprises parts of Austria, Germany, Switzerland and Italy.

The proportion of foreign direct investments from other Nordic countries is 17.5 percent in the Nordic region, while it is below 7.5 percent in the other regions. For the convenience retail sector the Nordic proportion is just over 20 percent of the total convenience retail, compared to less than 15 percent in the other regions. Only when it comes to the trading of goods is the regional proportion slightly larger in the SaarLorLux Rheinland/Pfalz- and Alps region compared to the Nordic region, where it is just over 13 percent.

To see what fewer border obstacles would mean, Copenhagen Economics has looked at Strömstad in Sweden and those commuting to Gothenburg in Sweden and Oslo in Norway. Strömstad's 11,690 citizens earn on average 238,000 Swedish kronor (€26,400) a year. Those who want to earn more have two choices: they can commute to Gothenburg, where the average annual wage is 304,000 Swedish kronor (€33,700), or they can commute to Oslo where the average income is 312,000 kronor (€34,600) a year.

Out of 5,281 workers in the municipality, 129 commute to Gothenburg while 142 commute to Oslo.

Commuting down to three factors

According to European research three factors explain 95 percent of cross-border commuting:

- If wages are one percent higher on the other side of the border, you get three percent more cross-border commuting.
- If the distance commuters must travel increases by one percent, cross-border commuting falls by 0.5 percent.
- Languages are an obstacle, but less so in the Nordic region.

The average Strömstad worker would earn 32 percent more by commuting to Oslo and 27 percent more by commuting to Gothenburg, rather than working in Strömstad. Oslo is also 30 kilometres closer than Gothenburg.

“So there should be more than 30 percent more commuters to Oslo than to Gothenburg, yet there are only 10 percent more,” said Martin H Thelle from Copenhagen Economics as he presented the report.

Because 142 people commute from Strömstad to Oslo while the distance and differences in pay should result in 163 commuters, the untapped potential stands at 15 percent.

By looking at all cross-border commuters in the Nordic region, Copenhagen Economics concludes there should be 3,000 to 6,000 more of them if all border obstacles were removed.



25,000 people took to the streets in Manchester as part of nearly 2 million strikers in the UK's largest strike for 30 years

British unions on the warpath

"This is just the beginning," said union leader Len McCluskey when nearly two million public sector workers joined the UK's largest strike in 30 years. On 30 November schools, hospitals, docks and airports were hit. David Cameron's government called the strike irresponsible and the unions militant, but more than 60 percent of Brits supported the strike. British trade unions believe they're facing a watershed which will bring them new support and power.

NEWS

01.12.2011

TEXT AND PHOTO: LARS ADNE BEVANGER, MANCHESTER

The big UK public sector strike on 30 November was the largest in a generation to be held under the auspices of the Trade Union Congress. Nearly two million teachers, health workers, border guards and others protested against the government's proposal for a new pension deal which means many will have to work for longer while receiving less pension pay.



With inflation at 5 percent, later years' pay rises both in the private and public sector have been negative in real terms. David Cameron's centre-right government coalition is struggling with an enormous budget deficit and nearly flat growth, and says there is no more money to pay for previously agreed pension deals, and that reform is unavoidable in the face of an ageing population.

"The government has moved the goal posts dramatically, with the result that retirement incomes are set to plummet. And poverty in retirement is a very real prospect for millions of people. Enough is enough," said Len McCluskey, the general secretary in the trade union Unite.

This strike is about much more than state pensions, he said.

"99 percent of the people are being made to pay for the greed, incompetence and arrogance of the one percent, made up of the City elite and the very rich. The government has one policy only - deficit reduction. Public services are being axed," said McCluskey.

New popularity

Tens of thousands of people marched in cities across the UK on 30 November. One of the around 25,000 strikers marching through the streets of Manchester under the banner Unity Is Strength was Tony Wilson, branch secretary of the trade union Unison.

"Because of the anti-union laws in Britain it is difficult compared to many other European countries to get everyone out on strike together. The pension issue unifies people across the public sector," said Wilson.



Tony Wilson from the trade union Unison says the pension issue can gather the entire country in protest against the government

He is one of many from the British trade union movement who believes this is the beginning of a new era for workers' rights in a country which has seen very few strikes since then prime minister Margaret Thatcher introduced stricter legislation which limited trade union power in the 1980s and 1990s.

"We're hoping this will be a new chapter where people will start fighting for their rights again in Britain. This is unlikely to be the only strike, because I don't think the government is going to give way just to a one-day strike. And there's already talks in the unions about further action in January."

This strike was also special because it had relatively strong support among the people in general. One poll showed more than 60 percent of Brits supported the strike. In the wake of many and long strikes in the 1980s the unions had lost much of their popular support, and became easy targets for politicians who could blame them when they had to explain why the country's economy had stalled.

"The government's fault"

But today it is clear to most people that unions are not to blame for the country's wrecked economy, but rather the financial system and bankers who drove the country into the ground with the 2008 financial crisis. When a new Conservative government now tries to recoup the losses by cutting the public sector, it is very unpopular in large parts of British society.



"A lot of the government cuts are affecting everybody - not just public sector workers," said Valerie Lee who works in the National Health Service in Manchester as a medical engineer. She, like many others, was striking for the very first time on 30 November.

"There's very, very few people now in society who are not affected in some way by the cuts and changes that this government is trying to bring in."

There are no traditions in the UK for tri-partite cooperation or collective agreements. The union membership numbers are too weak for this to work. And Valerie Lee thinks the government as employer has behaved appallingly in negotiations with trade unions during this conflict.

"Three years ago we negotiated changes to our pensions [with Gordon Brown's Labour government]. We agreed that we would pay more and that we would increase the age that we retire. We realised it was something we had to do to future-proof pensions. But this government [David Cameron's centre-right government] has come back at us again and said 'no you *will* pay more' and it's a 50 percent bigger contribution every month and we're not getting pay rises."

Enough is enough

"Nobody wants to be on strike. It represents the complete breakdown in negotiation and communication, and we're here today because we can't communicate with them and they won't negotiate with us," said Valerie Lee.

The government has said negotiations carried on right up until the day of action, and new talks started as soon as the strike finished. But trade unions say contact has been sporadic and on a very low level, and negotiations have been extremely slow moving.

"Negotiations have been going on for about seven or eight months, and there's been very, very little progress," local trade union leader Tony Wilson told the Nordic Labour Journal during the 30 November strike.

"Our leader, Dave Prentice of Unison, described the talks as glacial - they were so slow moving. So it comes to a point where we've said enough is enough."

No Nordic model

Just like Nordic countries like Norway and Sweden, the UK has not seen any major strikes during the past decades. But the reasons for that are very different.

The Nordic region enjoys long traditions of collective agreements and tri-party cooperation, where the parties more or less agree that it pays not to disagree too much. Solid basic agreements mean annual salary negotiations often amount to nothing more than tinkering with the details of what the parties have already agreed in the past.



among unions is weakest among younger workers and new labour market entrants.

"Maybe an event like this might start to change the direction of youth membership in trade unions," said Wright.

That could perhaps mean British trade unions are about to gain a new generation of members, which again could mean increasing willingness to strike among more and more people in the years to come.

The UK has not seen major strikes in nearly 30 years because trade unions under Margaret Thatcher were weakened by new legislation, which resulted in a halving of their membership between 1980 and today.

Low support means trade unions lack the authority to negotiate collective agreements - and there has not been much willingness to reach such agreements among the other parties either, said Chris Wright, researcher at the faculty of economics at Cambridge University.

"There is still real adversarialism within British industrial relations. Despite the efforts of people like Tony Blair, who championed a partnership model of industrial relations. The parties are less willing to go down a more Nordic tri-partite route, particularly the employers - there's absolutely no appetite among major business groups like the CBI (Confederation of British Industry) for such a move."

A new generation

Wright also thinks the UK might be facing a watershed when it comes to trade union membership support and the willingness to strike. It is particularly interesting, he says, that the 30 November strike had very strong support among young people. Nearly 80 percent of people between 18 and 24 supported the strike.

"Those figures are very interesting, because if you look at academic research over the past few years there's been a number of studies highlighting the fact that membership growth