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Minister for Employment

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Editorial: a Vision Zero for workplace
accidents

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Theme: Young people's working environment - a complicated case



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Editorial: a Vision Zero for workplace accidents

Lets get a Vision Zero for workplace accidents! That's the conclusion in the report 'Young workers' working environment in the Nordic countries', which forms the basis for this month's theme.

COMMENTS

09.10.2013

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, ACTING EDITOR

Vision Zero is a Swedish expression used in traffic accidents prevention. The aim is a future where no one will be killed or seriously injured.

The report's main author Pete Kines points to both negative and positive sides to being young in a workplace: the youngest workers run a greater risk of being involved in accidents, but because of their young age their injuries are often less serious than for older workers.

The report points out that there is no single problem or solution which will prevent all injuries. It is not enough just to focus on the youths, you must also look at safety culture, training and a host of other factors.

The youths are about to enter working life, but the borders between work, placements and studies are often vague. Part-time work is becoming more and more common, for instance within the retail sector. As more and more shops stay open at weekends and in the evening, mainly young women man the tills. A part-time worker who only works a few hours a week rarely gets the same support as a full-time employee.

The Nordic Labour Journal looks at three very different jobs for young people – we have met a couple of Finnish youths working in a call centre; a first job for many young people. It's an occupation with a bad reputation when it comes to the working environment, but here too much has been changing for the better.

We have followed Icelandic medical students on their way into a high status occupation, but who face a working environment at Iceland's main University Hospital, Landspítalinn in Reykjavik, which is so stressful that more than 90 percent of the students say they would not consider working there when they graduate. They don't even have a changing room and must change in a corridor – a symbol of how young workers are often treated.

How far does our concern for young workers stretch? Do the thousands of au pairs arriving to Norway and Denmark from the Philippines get a proper working environment too? Some of the au pairs experience forced labour, illustrated by an ongoing court case in Norway. A married couple stand charged of forcing two au pairs to work 96 hours a week.

The aim for working life policies should be that nobody should have to put their health at risk at work. But for those who do suffer an injury it is of course important that the health service works. The Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Minister, Dagfinn Høybråten, wants to extend Nordic cooperation within the health sector.



More part time jobs mean worse working environments for young people

Young workers represent a heterogeneous group facing complex risks in working life. That means it is no longer enough to just focus on the young people themselves. In order to secure preventative working environment measures you also need to look at surrounding issues. The challenge is to acknowledge the complexity and encourage new combined efforts to improve young people's working environments, says a new Nordic report.

THEME

09.10.2013

TEXT AND PHOTO: GUNHILD WALLIN

“What surprised me in this work is that we have fallen into a trap by solely focusing on the young workers, rather than looking at the underlying complexity of the working environment issues facing young people in working life. I want to

shine a light on these complex connections with this report,” says Pete Kines, Senior Researcher at the National Research Centre for the Working Environment in Denmark.

Pete Kines is the main author of the report ‘Young workers’ working environment in the Nordic countries’ which will be presented at the conference ‘Young people’s working environment’ in Stockholm on 9 October. The report was commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers which has been focusing on young people during the Swedish Presidency.

“It is particularly important to protect young people’s working environments to make sure they can get a foothold in the labour market with the best possible working conditions,” writes Sweden’s newly appointed Minister for Employment Elisabeth Svantesson in the report’s introduction.

The report aims to map the working situation for young people between 15 and 24 in the Nordic countries. How, where and how much do young people work, which legislation and rules govern their working environments, which risks are they facing and what kind of injuries do they get if they have accidents? The authors carried out an extensive trawl of existing literature which resulted in 10,000 publications, out of which 81 have been used for this study. They also used statistics from the different countries.

The Nordic countries are fairly similar when it comes to legislation and regulation of young people’s working conditions. If you’re under 18 there is a range of regulations covering working hours, the right to take breaks as well as working situations which young people should not be exposed to, e.g. dangerous machinery. The focus often rests on risks which young people might face in working life, with less focus on how to protect against more long-term dangers. There is also not much research on how bad working environments might affect young people later in life, although some studies are being initiated now.

Industrious Danes and Icelanders

Most 15 to 19 year olds work in the retail or grocery sector, but many also work in hotels and restaurants. 19 to 24 year olds often work in the health sector (women) or in the construction industry and in warehouses (men). There are great variations in the employment rate between the different countries, especially for people between 15 and 19. Young Icelanders and Danes work considerably more than their Norwegian, Finnish and Swedish contemporaries. 52 percent of Icelandic 15 to 19 year olds work, in Denmark the number is 44 percent, in Norway 35 percent, in Finland 24 percent while only 16 percent of Swedes in the same age group work. Many are in low-paid, unskilled jobs with irregular working hours. Young workers represent a very heterogeneous group, according to the report. They can be moonlighting students, students on work experience, in traineeships or students who have left school. Work varies too, from full-time employment to shift work, self employment or part-time work. There are many variations – one indication that young people in working life cannot be seen as a homogenous group.

So how dangerous can it be to be a young worker? Young people run a lower risk of being fatally injured at work, but

run a greater risk than older colleagues to suffer non-fatal injuries. This particularly applies to young men in retail, construction or manufacturing industries. Agriculture, forestry, hunting and fisheries are also sectors with high injury risks.

Dramatic increase in part-time work

The report clearly illustrates the dramatic increase in the number of 15 to 19 year olds who are in part-time employment – especially young women. As more and more shops stay open at weekends and in the evenings, it is first and foremost young women who man the tills and who serve customers. It used to be older women, but as the number of young women part-time workers is up, the number of older women part-time workers has fallen. This is one of the examples Pete Kines wants to highlight when he speaks about complex connections.

“Young part-time workers might not get the same introduction as full-time employees, nor the same follow-up. And they are not always seen as proper employees, perhaps not even in their own eyes. They also often work during the most intensive hours with more customers and stress, when regular staff have gone home. The adults are no longer there, nor are the bosses,” says Pete Kines.

Between school and work

The picture is usually different within industries. Young people who work there often work during daytime hours and can rely on older workers for support and help. But it is important not to forget that young people, no matter where they work, often find themselves in a transition between school and working life. This is also a factor which adds complexity to the picture, especially as the reasons for working can vary greatly from person to person. Some begin to work because they no longer want to go to school, others are moonlighting in evenings and at weekends. For many young people the entry into the labour market has been postponed, which means those who are 18 or older no longer benefit from the protection of working environment legislation and regulation aimed at younger workers – even though they might be entering into working life for the first time.

“When a young person starts working he or she steps into the adult world and initially find themselves in a transition phase between school and working life. They see how adults in the workplace approach risks, what kind of safety culture exists in the workplace and even if that culture does not fit with what they have been taught about safety they will imitate what they see and what other adults do. They are being socialised into a risk behaviour and thus they will be future proponents of that bad work culture,” says Pete Kines.

Think boldly!

The need to view young people as a heterogeneous group and to understand what transition phases between school and working life might mean to the individual young person represents one of the report’s main conclusions. Yet it is not enough to focus on the individual young person’s opportuni-

ties to improve the working environment. It is equally important to look at the young person's surroundings. What characterises the sector in which the young person works, the working tasks he or she must carry out and which culture is typical for that particular workplace? How is work organised and how can it promote or hinder the improvement of the working environment? Who are the colleagues and how do they think about and work with the working environment? These factors make up the complex world which is the young person's working environment, and the ambition to improve the working environment is necessary in order to begin to understand it, says Pete Kines.

He appeals to anyone who in any shape or form is involved in young people's working environment – be it employers, educators, safety officers, the social partners – to think boldly. Dare to see how heterogeneous the group of young workers is, but don't focus solely on the young people themselves. Also focus on the complex working life they are facing. Risks and dangers in working life can be prevented through cooperation and engagement.

"I would like to see a Vision Zero for young workers' working environment, like Sweden's programme aimed at preventing fatal traffic accidents," says Pete Kines.



Kim Jämsén has taken a gap year and prefers working at the SM-Mega call centre to slouching on the sofa at home

Call centres: young people's entry into working life

Few workplaces take on more diverse staff than call centres. Youth, pensioners, handicapped, immigrants – it is the attitude and voice that determines your success, not your background or look. Even so, one of the fastest growing sectors is struggling to find enough people who want to work.

THEME

09.10.2013

TEXT: CARL-GUSTAV LINDÉN, PHOTO: BENJAMIN SUOMELA

“For young people, call centres can represent a good entry point to working life, and also for special groups. This is a sector without prejudice, and that is important,” says Professor Nina Nevala at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and the University of Jyväskylä, who has been looking

at how the work environment for call centre staff can be improved.

Jeanette Borg, who runs the Suoramarkkinointi Megas (SM-Mega) call centre in the centre of Helsinki, readily agrees. She feels her work gives her great satisfaction because her

workplace represents the first step into working life for many.

“Young people learn to show up on time, they learn the reasons for why you work, they get a job certificate.”

Telephone salesperson. Consider the work. Most people associate it with pestering voices down the telephone which you want to get rid of as quickly as possible. But the trade is in rapid growth and its bad reputation has become a problem for employers. SM-Mega employees nearly 400 people around Finland and in the Baltics.

Managing Director Timo Niemi says he could hire 50 new people right now. The company has to turn down many commissions because they lack the capacity.

“There are so many unemployed people, but where are they?” wonders Niemi, who began working in telemarketing 27 years ago.

No collective agreement

In Finland call centres employ an estimated 100,000 people, but most work with customer relations in larger companies and there is great variation in working tasks. According to the private service sector Service Union United (PAM), there are around 10,000 people working for companies involved with telemarketing, and around half of the companies are members of the employer's union and therefore covered by collective agreements which means paying a minimum wage.

“When there is no collective agreement, the greatest problem is people work for a full month and perhaps get paid 100 Euro,” says head of negotiations Juha Ojala.

The trade union also believes the trade has an undeserved reputation of being a low-wage trap. Ojala says those who are good and who have long experience can earn big money as telemarketers. 5000 Euro a month is not uncommon. At Mega salaries varies between 1500 Euro and just over 4000 Euro.

Telemarketing is characterised by young staff working short contracts often part time – but this is not the case for all companies. The average age at SM-Mega's Helsinki office is around 40 and the oldest employee is 74 year old Sirkka-Liisa Salo, a former Finnish teacher who didn't want to stop working. In the evening many people in their 20s work to fund their studies.



Kim Jämsén at work.

A gap year

Two of the youngest ones are both 19. We meet friends Thomas Fagerholm who has worked here since the summer and Kim Jämsén who started two months ago. Both finished their upper secondary education in the spring. While Thomas was accepted at a vocational university college, Kim is taking a gap year while figuring out what he wants to do in the future. This job, they say, is much better than slouching on the sofa at home.

SM-Mega has between 70 and 80 customers delivering customer directories. This means the company's salespeople don't do any cold calling, but target people who have already showed an interest in the product. It amounts to 5,000 calls a day.

“If it's an unknown product, most people will hang up,” says Thomas.

He says the salesperson's mood is very important.

“If you're happy and positive you feel strong, and things go well.”

“You should sound friendly on the telephone. It doesn't matter so much what you say, but how you say it,” Thomas points out.

“For me things are going well,” says Kim: “I haven't had many bad days.”

Thomas agrees: “There are more and more good days.”

According to Jeanette Borg, the office manager, Kim and Thomas are fairly typical. Youths who work while waiting for their studies to start. And she thinks the telephone sales has an important function in a young person's life; to make an impression on future employers.

“Our mission is to help young people getting into working life.”

She has been working with telephone sales herself since 2005.

“In the beginning I couldn't tell people where I was working,

but now I confront them: we are not like any job out there, we are important and we have customers who expect the job to be done – we are like nurses.”

SM-Mega has a list of seven skills characterising a good telephone salesperson, but Jeanette says she has witnessed the most unlikely people succeeding too.

Crucial management

Nina Nevala has helped improve the work environment by coming up with solutions to ease the strain on neck, shoulders, eyes and ears.

”Management is crucial to how work is organised and crucial to training – so far there has not been too much focus on that.”

She points out that telephone sales is a trade in which people with handicaps are not discriminated against, and there are special solutions which helps for instance people with reduced eyesight to work.

Timo Niemi says health problems have also been reduced considerably since he started in the trade. Before sales people had to hold the handsets and write information on the computer. Now they wear lightweight headsets and the computer looks after the documentation. And employees also have a responsibility.

“When there’s a break you could do something else than going outside to smoke.”



Ragnhildur Hauksdóttir is a medical student at the University of Iceland

Medical students won't work at Iceland's National University Hospital

Less than ten percent of Iceland's medical students want to seek work at Iceland's largest hospital, the university hospital Landspítalinn. Why? Bad working conditions, stress, low pay and long working hours.

THEME

09.10.2013

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, PHOTO: FRÍÐRIK FRÍÐRIKSSON

Iceland's National University Hospital Landspítalinn needs some 1,000 doctors in order to operate well. Today the hospital employs only 800 doctors. This means the hospital has to recruit doctors from abroad.

But Iceland also trains its own doctors - 48 of them every year. That's why the consultant in general medicine and Deputy Hospital Director Ólafur Baldursson at Landspítalinn thinks it is worrying when less than one in ten medical stu-

dents are interested in working in his hospital. Iceland trains doctors so that they can work in Iceland.

A new survey shows that students are pessimistic when it comes to Iceland's hospital environment. Just under 90 percent consider the conditions to be unacceptable. More than 60 percent are considering moving abroad at the end of their studies. Just 7.8 percent would consider a job at Landspítalinn.

Everyone is aware of the situation

Ragnhildur Hauksdóttir (22), studies medicine at the University of Iceland and right now she is practicing at Landspítalinn's surgical ward. She says the debate surrounding the hospital's environment has been negative lately, and that this is not only about continuing budget cuts. It might also have something to do with a lack of training of medical students. The lack of personnel means doctors focus on patients and don't have much time for looking after students. The problem is most severe in general medicine.

"All the doctors know that this is not a good situation. They really try to find time for training right now", says Ragnhildur Hauksdóttir.

"But that can be hard when they are very busy with other work," she says.

No time for supervision

Ragnhildur Hauksdóttir is in her fourth year of training and arrives at the hospital at 8am and usually stays until 4pm. At weekends she and her fellow students work shifts under the supervision of on call specialists and other doctors. They work at least 16 hours, from 8am until midnight. Icelandic news media says 50 medical students have been working night shifts without supervision over the summer.

In the past, specialists and other on call doctors gave regular lectures and held meetings with students to discuss various cases, but after recent years' cuts there has been no time for that.

"The pressure on staff has been enormous and wages are too low. So the debate has not been particularly encouraging and this can influence students to develop a negative attitude," says Ragnhildur Hauksdóttir.

The medical students are also exposed to considerable stress. Surveys show work engagement among medical students and newly graduated doctors to be zero. They feel the work pressure is too high and complain about serious stress. They feel more ill and angry, depressed and tired than in 2012.

The working environment in itself is inadequate. Fjóla Dögg Sigurðardóttir is the head of the student union. She says that students for instance do not get a dressing room but must get changed in the lobby. Health safety is also a problem.

"Students aren't automatically given the same inoculations as other hospital staff unless they insist on being vaccinated," says Fjóla Dögg Sigurðardóttir.

A worrying situation

All hospital staff get a discount in the hospital canteen, but medical students don't. They must pay full price. Fjóla Dögg Sigurðardóttir thinks this is unfair. She says students can't work to make money while studying, so it would make sense to grant them the same discount as staff, because they have

no chance to leave the hospital to find cheaper lunch alternatives.

Professor Dean Magnús Karl Magnússon at the University of Iceland is worried for Landspítalinn. He has discussed the issue with the student union, the Ministry of Health and Social Security and the hospital's management. He thinks the situation is worrying.

"Cuts at Landspítalinn in recent years have led to inadequate training of medical students," says Dean Magnús Karl Magnússon.

"The university hospitals are interested in jobs, especially as staff at this type of hospitals can work both as specialists and also do research," he continues.

"But budgets have been cut by more than 20 percent over the past ten years. That of course does have an impact on how things are run," says Magnús Karl Magnússon.

"Young doctors don't apply for jobs at Landspítalinn. This is serious," he says.

A social problem?

Consultant Ólafur Baldursson says the hospital management is looking for a solution together with the Ministry of Finance and the medical students. Ólafur Baldursson thinks it is important to find a way of making Landspítalinn an attractive workplace for young doctors.



He wonders whether the staffing problem is unique for Landspítalinn or if this reflects a larger social problem in Iceland.

"I am worried that Iceland is turning into a European backwater, in the same way that the city of Raufarhöfn is to the whole of Iceland - from where educated people move away never to return," says Ólafur Baldursson.

Complicated training

The competition for educated staff is becoming tougher and tougher. Ólafur Baldursson

thinks Iceland won't necessarily solve the problems at Landspítalinn by employing more doctors. He thinks there is a need for a modern hospital building which works well, modern technology and more support staff on the wards which can help ease the doctors' workload.

"Medical training is complicated throughout the world. The Americans have good clinical programmes for young doctors and medical students, where they have to work hard. Nobody asks questions about working hours," says Ólafur Baldursson.



Filipina 'Nena' – not her real name – found help from Magnhild Otnes at Oslo's Au pair Center. She has had three host families in nine months. The first paid her only a few hundred kroner for three months' work

Au pairs balance between cultural exchange and work

How far does our concern for young people's working environment stretch? Does it go as far as to cover Filipino au pairs in Norway and Denmark? This month saw the start of a trial in Oslo against a host family who allegedly forced two au pairs to work 96 hour weeks.

THEME

09.10.2013

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

In Denmark research papers have been published looking at whether some au pairs have been victims of trafficking. They pay a lot of money to agencies which link them up with host families, ending up in a debt trap they cannot get out of – in effect a kind of forced labour. In 1998 the Philippines introduced a ban on its citizens travelling abroad as au pairs, after a series of serious abuse cases. The ban was lifted for Den-

mark, Norway and Switzerland in 2010, followed by several other countries in 2012.

It is evident that the kind of cultural exchange that au pairs were supposed to be part of no longer fits the situation for a large majority of them. Au pair means 'equal to' and the point was that au pairs should be treated almost like a family member. According to current regulation in Norway they should

not do more than 30 hours of childcare or light housework a week, they are entitled to two days off as well as housing and food. The host family should even pay their return ticket between their home country and Norway. They should also be allowed to learn the local language.

New rule on 1 July

A new rule introduced on 1 July this year means a host family can lose the right to have an au pair for one, two or five years if they fail to follow these regulations. If they commit an offence punishable by three months in prison or more, the host family quarantine could last up to ten years.

“There are an estimated 3,000 au pairs in Norway. 80 to 90 percent of them come from the Philippines. People look at au pairs differently in Sweden and Norway. In Sweden it is considered to be work, in Norway it is cultural exchange,” says Magnhild Otnes who runs the Au pair Center On Equal Terms in Oslo.

The centre was established to help both au pairs and host families.

“We focus on au pairs’ rights. It’s me and a legal expert in the office. We can negotiate solutions when conflicts arise – it is often about money which has not been paid. If matters go to court we can provide a lawyer from the Norwegian Union of Municipal and General Employees, the largest trade union within the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions.”

Work most important

As if to underline the proximity to the courts, the Au pair Center shares an entry hall with Borgarting District Court. Only a few cases end up in court, but the married couple now charged with forcing two au pairs in a row not only to work in the house, but also in their food shop nearly 24 hours a day, risks five years in prison.

“Work is the main reason Filipinas come here, not cultural exchange. There might be some Polish au pairs who have read Knut Hamsun and want to see his home country, but they are few and far between. The Filipina women are here to make money, that is the main reason, but that doesn’t mean that their stay can still become some sort of a cultural exchange,” says Magnhild Otnes.



We visit Au pair Center on a Sunday, when it operates a cafe, and meet Beata from Poland and Lisa from Germany. Both are happy with their time as au pairs in Norway. Beata has been in the country for six months, while Lisa arrived only four weeks ago. Both keep what they earn and have structured working conditions with weekends off.

“I wanted to come to Norway as an au pair because I really want to learn Norwegian. I am a trained engineer specialising in transport and logistics, and would love to take further education within oil and gas,” says Beata, who first visited Norway as a student and already has many friends here.

Lisa was tempted by the nature and snowboarding. She too is interested in languages and has already learnt five. Both live with families who have small children.

“The only thing I’d complain about would be the food. I don’t like fish, but there’s a lot of it in Norway,” says Lisa.

“Filipinos take risks”

We have also set up a meeting with a Filipina au pair who we’ll call ‘Nena’ because she does not want to be seen as being difficult when seeking other au pair jobs in the future, and she also has to consider her reputation back home.

She comes in on a bus from somewhere outside of Oslo, where she is working for her third host family since arriving in Norway nine months ago. She appears fragile as she enters the centre in a turquoise jacket and long, black hair.

“I am 24, but I’m really 16,” she jokes.

“That’s what everyone thinks I am.”

Like many other Filipinas she arrived in Norway because one of her cousins worked as an au pair here before. The agreement was negotiated through contacts.

“I admit that before arriving in this country I had agreed to work as an au pair for two different families. But we Filipinos are a people who take risks. I took whatever opportunity I had to work abroad,” says Nena.

The deal was that she would clean for the other family on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but the work with the host family was far more time consuming than she had anticipated.

“The family had a three month old baby and a 20 months old toddler. By host mother needed help all the time and left me on my own with the baby. At the same time I was supposed to clean the house. She was very critical and wanted everything to be perfect. If I left the tiniest of spots on the window after cleaning it, I was forced to do it again.”

Deteriorating relations

The relationship between Nena and her host family deteriorated. She was not allowed to eat with them and the food they bought her was not enough. She decided to end the contract with the family, which carried a one month notice clause.

“The family did not want to pay me what I was owed, because they had paid my ticket to Norway. All I got was 700 kroner (€86) after working extra for them to prepare for a birthday party. I worked for 24 hours.

For Nena who had never been to a foreign country this was a difficult conflict. Not only did she live with her employer, but when she wasn't paid she could not send money to her family in the Philippines either. Her own mother died when Nena was 17, soon after giving birth to her little brother. Her father disappeared for a long time. Nena also has a big brother, but he was left with the responsibility to keep the family together while she studied business economy for four years. The family was forced to live in a house they built on some relatives' land.

“They want me to buy my grandmother's house. When I couldn't send money, my relatives write bad things about me on Facebook,” she says and starts crying when thinking about her first months in Norway.

A brighter future

“Even though we fought, we became friends again. But I couldn't stay living there.

She talks about her relationship with her third host mother:

“When I came to the bus stop there was a woman with very short hair who walked like a man. She can be quite blunt, but deep inside I know she is soft,” she laughs.

The family lives in a house in the country. Nena has regulated working conditions and gets 4,000 kroner (€493) a month after tax. She keeps half and sends the rest to her family in the Philippines.

That's why the future looks brighter, but her story is one example of how exposed au pairs can be.

“There should be two different visas. One for maids and one for au pairs. Many Norwegian families would find life harder if we stopped all au pairs from the Philippines, but if you're

actually looking for a maid you should pay for it,” says Magnhild Otnes.



Elisabeth Svantesson is Sweden's new Minister for Employment

On 17 September Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt appointed Elisabeth Svantesson as his new Minister for Employment. She replaces Hillevi Engström who became Minister for International Development Cooperation. The reshuffle was announced during the Prime Minister's government declaration.

NEWS

09.10.2013

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: MARTINA HUBER

The Ministry of Employment is important to the government coalition, and the choice of Elisabeth Svantesson created instant debate. Because the position represents one of the main issues for the Moderate Party and the centre-right coalition, being Minister for Employment is considered a heavyweight political position. During Hillevi Engström's tenure, Sweden's Public Employment Service was in big trouble and its

Director General was forced to step down. This was seen by many as one of the reasons Hillevi Engström was moved to a different ministry.

"Elisabeth Svantesson possesses the combination which is useful here. She has her own experience from working life, a solid, relevant academic background – not least dealing with how to get immigrants into Swedish working life – and she

enjoys a very solid political background,” said Fredrik Reinfeldt about his choice of Minister for Employment during the press conference at his office after the reshuffle.

Elisabeth Svantesson, born in 1967, is a member of parliament for the Moderate Party and has been leader for the parliament’s labour market committee. But the debate around her being chosen did not stem from her lack of government minister experience or her views on labour market politics. It was because of her religious beliefs. Elisabeth Svantesson is a former member of the controversial movement ‘Livets ord’ (Word of Life) and the anti-abortion movement ‘Yes to Life’, and Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt stressed that her previous religious choices had nothing to do with her new job. Yet the much of the debate which followed would centre on this.

Elisabeth Svantesson herself pointed to the right politicians have to belong to different religions or to have no religion at all. She said she was looking forward to her new position.

“This is a job I think will be fun and very though, and I am prepared and want to win next year’s election,” said Elisabeth Svantesson during the post-reshuffle press conference.

In a comment in the daily Svenska Dagbladet a few weeks later, headlined ‘There will be more jobs which will benefit more people’ she outlined her vision for employment policies.

“Sweden should be a country where everyone who can work should have a job to go to. This is my employment policy. To get there we need to continue to protect and develop *arbet-slinjen* [‘the employment line’ - a policy central to the coalition, meaning the need for able people to actively seek work or education before they apply for state benefits] towards a labour market which is both including and flexible.

“I will work to create wider roads into the labour market,” she writes.

She wants to protect existing reforms, but she has also identified important future challenges. One of them is to continue reviewing the situation for young people and immigrants who find it harder than others to enter into the labour market. Another important challenge according to Elisabeth Svantesson is to improve retraining and matching.

Five areas have been made priorities and this is where thresholds will be lowered and where wider roads leading to jobs will be created. Firstly young people should receive support at an early stage and help to finish their education. Young people are most at risk if they become unemployed for longer periods of time, and must therefore be prioritised and get extra support early on – for instance through work experience and training or matching and contacts with employers.

Elisabeth Svantesson also wants to improve the links between education and jobs, she wants improved matching and to improve people’s chances to retrain. The aim for all these focus areas is a growing labour market offering more jobs. People’s skills must be looked after and this will be done by creating more jobs.

“As Minister for Employment it is my most important task to work towards creating a labour market with space for everyone,” concludes Elisabeth Svantesson in her comment.

The Public Employment Service is a central player in many of the prioritised areas, but the authority has experienced real problems which resulted in Director General Angeles Bermudez Svankvist stepping down in August this year. During the press conference at the Prime Minister’s office, Elisabeth Svantesson was asked what she would do to sort out the problems at the Public Employment Service.

“This is my first day at work, but I want to look closer at this and make sure we simply find a solution,” she answered.



Dagfinn Høybråten's new Nordic project: health cooperation

Much tighter cooperation between Nordic health services is in the pipeline and if it succeeds the cooperation model can easily be expanded to include other policy areas which would help develop the Nordic welfare model. That's the vision of the project's chief architect, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers Dagfinn Høybråten.

PORTRAIT

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TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: THOMAS GLAHN

When the so-called 2009 Stoltenberg report highlighted a considerable potential for a Nordic foreign and defence co-operation, it kicked off unprecedented defence collaboration in the Nordic region. A similar report on the potential for Nordic health sector cooperation has been initiated and it too might well herald unprecedented joint efforts between the Nordic countries.

That's what Dagfinn Høybråten thinks. One of his first major tasks as Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers has been to secure the backing from the Nordic ministers of health and social affairs for launching a survey into how Nordic countries' health sectors can cooperate closer and in a more committed way.

“The Stoltenberg report is an inspiration. Its recommendations have by and large been executed and resulted in defence cooperation. It used to be considered impossible, yet now everyone sees the sense in a practical sharing of resources. We can do the same within the health sector to great effect,” he says.

Political will to set targets and to act

The Nordic countries are small and share the challenges of rising costs and demands for specialisation in the health sector, while fewer people are available to pay for it. That's why cooperation can bring great rewards, believes Dagfinn Høybråten. And initial feedback from ministries indicate that there is political will both to set clear targets for Nordic health cooperation and to sign up to action.

The former Swedish Minister of Health, county governor and long-term member of parliament for the Liberal Party, Bo Könberg, has been tasked with overseeing a report on the health sector. He will visit the Nordic countries to talk to politicians and health sector experts to map the most important health challenges facing them in the next 10 to 15 years. The findings will form the basis for his recommendations which will be presented in May 2014 and debated during a Nordic meeting of ministers for health and social affairs in July 2014.

Nordic health cooperation is not a new idea, underlines Dagfinn Høybråten. It already exists and works very well, for instance under the auspices of the WHO and the EU, patients can be treated for certain medical conditions in other Nordic countries from their own, and there is Nordic cooperation on organ transplants.

Common ground despite differences

But now the cooperation can be made more systematic and it can be expanded to include more areas, thinks Dagfinn Høybråten. Just which areas this will cover will be identified in the report, but closer and more committed cooperation on highly specialised treatments could be beneficial, the Secretary General says.

He used to be Norway's Minister for Health and was the man behind the then very controversial Norwegian total ban on smoking in restaurants and night clubs. Norway was seen as going it alone both internationally and within the Nordic region. Dagfinn Høybråten admits there are different approaches to health policies in the different Nordic countries. Yet the differences are not so big that common ground cannot be found.

“This does not stop cooperation, the fact that we in the Nordic region differ in our views on smoking and even more in our view on alcohol. I never tried to influence my Nordic minister colleagues to introduce a smoking ban, but leading by example is often the most powerful thing you can do. Since then nearly 50 countries have introduced smoking legislation

– even Denmark, despite that country's tradition for not interfering in personal freedoms.”

Protecting welfare

If the Nordic countries can be made to enter into more comprehensive cooperation on health, the Nordic Council of Ministers has solved its part of the task, and it will be up to the individual countries to carry the cooperation forward. In that case Dagfinn Høybråten is ready to use the same method in order to intensify cooperation in other areas as well. He sees benefits with even more issues being solved together and with Nordic countries sharing more tasks between them. This will create better solutions and be more efficient, which is necessary to maintain and develop the Nordic welfare model, he says.

Dagfinn Høybråten is also an ambassador for a better branding of the Nordic welfare model:

“The Economist calls it a supermodel. It is efficient despite high taxes, and we have a highly praised three-partite system in the labour market which secures solid respect and rules for the social partners to follow. The rest of the world praises us while we ourselves are often critical. It is a shame and it is unfortunate, because many countries consider the Nordic countries to be role models.”

Boss for several cultures a new thing

He came into the job as Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers in March 2013 from a long career as a politician and public official. He has also been head of the Norwegian National Insurance Service with responsibility for 8,000 staff. But this is the first time he heads a multicultural organisation with both Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, Icelandic and Danish employees.

“It's an exciting task, because even though we are neighbours there are linguistic and cultural differences which it is important for me as leader to understand.”

He has already experienced that there is big differences in social conventions and in how direct Nordic people are. Then there are the language differences which Dagfinn Høybråten not only wants to learn and understand, but he also enjoys them and find them “very interesting.”