

Comments

Editorial: The unacceptable consequences of border obstacles

Theme

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News

How about a personal trainer - for your brain?

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Home address stops Valgerður's maternity pay

Apr 16, 2012

Newsletter from the Nordic Labour Journal 3/2012

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Theme: When commuting becomes an obstacle race



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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Björn Lindahl

EMAIL

nljeditor@gmail.com

WEB

www.nordiclabourjournal.org

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Editorial: The unacceptable consequences of border obstacles

A long and comprehensive job to find and solve the key problems met by Nordic citizens working in a different Nordic country is nearing its end.

COMMENTS

15.04.2012

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, DEPUTY EDITOR

On 19 April a conference in Sandvika near Oslo will see the publication of a report on 36 border obstacles which all make the Nordic region a less flexible labour market than it could be - and which can create serious problems for those who are affected by them.

We look at one example of how bad things can get - Icelandic Valgerdur Thordis Snæbjarnardottir who moved to Norway to work for a Norwegian travel agency specialising on Icelandic travel. In 2008 she and her partner decided to move back to Iceland, where Valgerdur fell pregnant. She kept her job at the same travel agency in Norway and pays taxes and social insurance there.

But as she moved she fell between two chairs. Neither Norway nor Iceland want to pay her maternity money. The common Nordic labour market turned out to have holes into which citizens who want to do the right thing could still fall.

Most of those who cross border commute or who work abroad are content, however. It means more than simply getting a job or getting better paid. They look for the challenges and opportunities to develop their competence.

“We feel we get the best of both Denmark and Sweden this way,” say Per and Eva Andreasson who live on the outskirts of Malmö and who have both been commuting to Copenhagen for the past five years.

Half a million Nordic citizens have either moved to another Nordic country or been cross border commuting for the past ten years. Between 2001 and 2008 the commuting between Nordic countries increased by 166 percent.

The average commuter is Swedish, and the largest flow of commuters is the one from Sweden to Norway and Denmark, according to a new report from Statistics Sweden, commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

For the first time ever we get to know who commutes and why.

“We were surprised not more were unemployed before looking for work across the border. The driving force seems to not to be unemployment but the fact that it is considered attractive to apply for jobs outside your own country,” says Carl-Gunnar Hanaeus at Statistics Sweden.

It is high time to border obstacles get the attention they deserve. One of the initiatives from the Nordic Council is to make sure the issue is debated more or less simultaneously in all of the Nordic countries.



Travel consultant Valgerður Þórdís Snæbjarnardóttir with her son Róbert Aron Larssen, who is just under nine months old

Home address stops Valgerður's maternity pay

An Icelandic woman who lives in Iceland but works for an Oslo-based business experienced the cross border commuter's nightmare. Despite contributing to Norway's national insurance fund since 2003, she receives no maternity pay. She doesn't even know who will pay the hospital bill for when she gave birth to her son. Neither Norway nor Iceland wants to pay.

THEME

15.04.2012

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, PHOTO: GUNNAR V. ANDRÉSSON

Travel consultant Valgerður Þórdís Snæbjarnardóttir had her son Róbert Aron Larssen in Reykjavik at the beginning of August 2011, where she lives with her Norwegian partner.

Snæbjarnardóttir has been working for the travel agency Islandia Travel in Oslo since 2006. She lived in Norway between 2003 and 2008 but moved back to Iceland and has worked from there ever since. She has received her salary in Norwegian kroner and has naturally been paying tax and customs to the Norwegian state.

"When I fell pregnant I contacted NAV [The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service] to get information on what would happen to maternity rights," says Valgerður Þórdís Snæbjarnardóttir.

NAV was established when Norway's job centres, national insurance fund and municipal social services were merged.

"Only a formality"

"We were told that since I was a member of the national insurance fund the application should be only a formality, I would be guaranteed maternity pay," she continues.

Snæbjarnardóttir was told to hand in an application two months before her due date. She sent it in plenty of time but was then told she should have applied four months before her due date. Her application was then turned down at the end of September. The reason was she was not a member of the Norwegian national insurance fund, even though she had been paying into it.

Snæbjarnardóttir has had the same job in the same workplace since 2008. She says that in the tourism industry it doesn't matter in which office you're sitting.

"I still work for the same travel agency in Norway," she says.

"But now I have an address in Iceland. I used to have a Norwegian address," she continues, and says she believes it is her address which is creating a problem.

Maternity pay not a given

Snæbjarnardóttir travelled to Norway last autumn to find out why she was not receiving any maternity pay, despite having paid into the fund all these years. At NAV she was recommended to apply retroactively to become a member of the national insurance fund.

She has now sent an application to NAV.

Snæbjarnardóttir has not received any maternity pay since she had her baby at the beginning of August. She and her husband had a reserve fund which they lived off at first. Now they've sold their Oslo flat in order to support their family.

"It doesn't seem to be a given to be able to receive maternity pay," she says.



Essi Rentola has headed the group of Nordic officials who have suggested ways of removing border obstacles. Here at a conference on the theme at the Swedish parliament in Stockholm

All problems are solvable - but new obstacles often emerge faster than old ones are removed

Border obstacles are words which don't really do the issue justice. Getting across borders is the least of Nordic citizens' problems - they've enjoyed a common labour market and passport-free travel since 1954.

THEME

15.04.2012

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The problems arise when you have moved or have been cross border commuting for some time. The border obstacle currently highest on the list is unemployment insurance systems.

"Inflexible rules on unemployment insurance means cross border commuters and people who move within the Nordic region risk 'falling out' of the unemployment insurance system, or they risk seeing their benefit dramatically reduced when they become unemployed because they have moved or

because they work on the other side of the border," says Lóa Brynjúlfsdóttir, general secretary at the Council of Nordic Trade Unions, NSF.

"The problems arise when each country's set of regulations clash with another country's set of regulations. That's why we need a better coordination of the Nordic systems for unemployment insurance."

35 border obstacles

The Nordic Council of Ministers established a Forum on Border Obstacles in 2007 led by Ole Norrback. It comprises former politicians with a lot of experience of how society works. The Forum on Border Obstacles has identified 39 border obstacles which have since been reduced to 36 obstacles. A group of 12 Nordic officials have been tasked to find solutions to these.

“We wrote a final report with suggested solutions to all the 35 border obstacles left on the list. In certain cases we have changed the approach because the way a problem was described was not accurate - ‘isn’t it rather *this* which is the basic problem,’ we’ve been asking ourselves,” says Essi Rentola, head of coordination of international issues at The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, Kela.

The final report will be presented at a conference on border obstacles hosted by Norway, the current chair of the Nordic Council of Ministers. Results from further work will then be presented to ministers for social affairs in June and ministers for labour in September.

“Nearly all of the problems are solvable in some way, but we haven’t yet calculated the costs,” says Essi Rentola.

Border obstacles mean costs in any case - in the form of less flexible labour markets and fewer opportunities for Nordic citizens.

New obstacles emerge all the time

But both Essi Rentola and her group and officials and the Forum on Border Obstacles warn failure to establish routines to prevent the emergence of new obstacles will mean new ones will be created faster than old ones can be solved. Every time a new law or reform is introduced, the negative impact on free movement should be taken into account.

“New legislation often comes in fast. One wants to solve a certain issue in their own country and don’t think about the consequences this could have for citizens who live in another country,” says Essi Rentola.

One thorny issue is rules on taxation.

Danish capital pension earned in Denmark will for instance be subject to 40 to 60 percent taxation in Denmark if it is taken out of the country when a person moves.

When the pension is then received in the new country (Norway or Finland) it will be subject to further taxation. There will be no deduction for the Danish taxation because taxes and excise are not deducted against each other according to the Nordic rules on double taxation.

One solution to this problem could be to change the double taxation rules to allow bilaterally deductible taxes and excise.



The number of young people applying for jobs in Norway has increased considerably. In 2008 16,000 youths worked in Norway and 5,000 in Denmark. The picture shows the Öresund bridge

The typical cross border commuter is Swedish

A new Statistics Sweden survey due to be published in May shows Nordic cross border commuting increased by 166 percent between 2001 and 2008. Swedes are most likely to work in neighbouring countries, and now 80 percent of Nordic citizens who commute to Denmark and Norway come from Sweden. Higher wages seem to be the biggest draw.

THEME

15.04.2012

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

“Working in Norway is a great opportunity for people in our region and many here think of it as an obvious thing to do. Norway is so close and is viewed by many as the same area. There’s a strong labour market and wages are better,” says Marisa Chefe Conde at the job centre in Arvika, one of the areas in western Sweden where cross border commuting is part of everyday life for many people.

Mobile Swedes

A cross border commuter is a person who lives in one country and has his or her main income from a job in another country. Between 2001 and 2008 cross border commuting has increased a lot and for the most part Swedes are behind this increase. In 2008 some 47,000 workers commuted between the Nordic countries and 80 percent of them were Swedes. More Swedes go to Norway than to Denmark, but the com-

muting looks different in different regions. The Öresund region is special as it is dominated by two large cities while the commuting into Norway is more spread out.

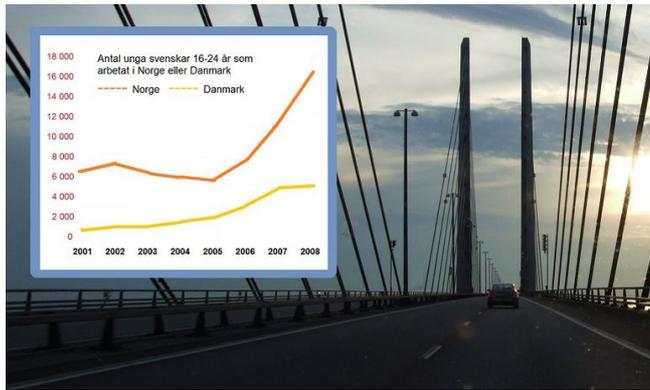


Diagram showing the number of Swedish youth 16-24 years working in Denmark and Norway.

These are some of the results from the report ‘Cross border commuting from Sweden to Denmark and Norway between 2001 and 2008’, due to be published in May. It has been written by Statistics Sweden on commission from the Nordic Council of Ministers and builds on cooperation between statistical authorities in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. The report’s mandate is to demonstrate the nature of cross border movement and also to identify the typical cross border commuter. The idea is to provide information which can be of help for regional decision makers.

“It’s important to map the major cross border movements. It’s important for trade and for growth in the border regions. The purpose of cross border commuting is to create a larger labour market, and the larger it is the more productive it can become,” says Carl-Gunnar Hanaeus at Statistics Sweden.

More carrot than stick

The typical cross border commuter is quite young - half of them are less than 35. Just over 50 percent have finished college and a third have further education. Of those, many are nurses, doctors, economists and technicians. More than half of cross border commuters in 2006 were single, and of those who were married or lived in partnerships fewer had children living at home compared to those who worked in Sweden. There are still more men than women who cross border commute, but women are on the increase. This is particularly the case in Denmark, where the number of women cross border commuters has risen from one in three to 40 percent. In Norway too more and more women are cross border commuting, and today the number is around one third. The average commuting period lasted for three years and in 2006 around one third of people who chose to work in a neighbouring country were first-time commuters.

“We were surprised not more were unemployed before looking for work across the border. The driving force seems to not

to be unemployment but the fact that it is considered attractive to apply for jobs outside your own country,” says Carl-Gunnar Hanaeus at Statistics Sweden.

Cross border commuters are found in all trades, but most work in the service industry. The highest growth in cross border commuting is found within the temping agency trade, which increased by 758 percent between 2001 and 2008, followed by the retail trade which during the same period increased its Swedish labour force by 355 percent. Some eight percent of cross border commuters worked in healthcare during the period while the number of commuters in the building trade fell.

Changing flow

People moving across Nordic borders to work is nothing new, and has in fact been encouraged in the Nordic countries. The idea has been to match supply and demand and as a result strengthen pan-Nordic competitiveness. Nordic citizens have been free to move between countries without work permits since 1954, and in reality even long before that. Over time the flow of workers have changed direction. In the 1960s and 70s Sweden’s labour market was interesting to Nordic neighbours, not least a lot of Finns came. Swedes traveled to Norway and Denmark mainly to shop.

Today the flow has been reversed. Swedes in the Öresund region commute to the Copenhagen region and in Swedish border municipalities of Västra Värmland and Västra Götaland many commute to Östfold or Oslo. Årjäng, the neighbouring municipality to Västra Värmland, belongs to Oslo’s local labour market. Strömstad and Tanum in Sweden make up another local labour market alongside Norwegian Sarpsborg, Fredrikstad, Halden and several other smaller, nearby municipalities, and in the Västra Götaland region there is cross border cooperation to ease commuting and create a greater labour market.

One important part of the cooperation is to understand how labour moves around the region, and this is a kind of cooperation which is organised by projects like KUSK, within the framework of the cross border Interreg Sweden-Norway programme. KUSK stands for Competence, Development, Statistics and Communication.

“The Norwegian economy enjoys a greater level of growth and they are dependent on us for labour and we are dependent on them for jobs. Norwegians also invest in companies, they shop and many spend their spare time here,” says Christina Christiansson, an analysts at the secretariat for regional development at the Västra Götaland region.

No fear of a brain drain

The report’s mandate does not include finding a reason for why Swedes represent nearly all of today’s cross border commuting. Those involved with cross border commuting to Norway see active, interested Norwegian employers who will happily hire Swedes.

“There’s huge interest among Norwegian employers to hire Swedes, who are often described as engaged, service minded and responsible. Being Swedish is an advantage and there are great needs to be met across all trades in Norway today,” says Marisa Chefe Conde at the Arvika job centre.

The report’s results do not indicate any brain drain either. Relatively few of the commuters have higher education, and most health care workers only work for limited periods of time abroad - for instance during holidays or while they have time off from their permanent jobs in Sweden. The people Marisa Chefe Conde meet have not indicated there’s any sign of a brain drain from Sweden - a country which also lacks enough health care workers.

“Nurses who work in Norway don’t tend to move, they only try it for a while before they return. For many this is a chance to earn some extra money and to try different jobs. It is also an achievement to have dared to work in a different country. It demonstrates an ability to show initiative and allows people to contribute with new knowledge,” she says.

Christina Christiansson does however think demographic changes might mean the competition for labour will be tougher in the future, as more and more people retire.

“It’s important to be aware of the fact that it can become very difficult in future to secure enough labour within the health care sector, as the number of older people is increasing while a large proportion of today’s labour force approaches retirement,” she says.

Both Carl-Gunnar Hanaeus at Statistics Sweden and Christina Christiansson at the Västra Götaland region are worried about how to develop cross border labour movement statistics in future. The report which is about to be published was commissioned by the Nordic Council of Ministers, and builds on previously collected statistics. It is unclear how such statistics will be funded in future, and it is not certain any more will be produced. The ideal solution would be a pan-Nordic funding model, but the Finns do not want to contribute and the Danes are mostly interested in mapping the commuting patterns in the Öresund region. So far the Västra Götaland regions have invested their own money, for instance, as well as the Skåne region.

“When we show how people move across borders we help create a basis for regional decision makers and we create an incentive for cooperation. Cross border commuters are also of national interest to Sweden, because Swedes are earning 20 billion kronor outside of their own country - money which is not taxed in Sweden despite the fact that people actually live here,” says Carl-Gunnar Hanaeus.



Per Andreasson with the Øresund bridge in the background

Commuters across Øresund: We feel both Danish and Swedish

Swedish Per Andreasson and his wife have spent the past five years commuting from their home in Sweden to jobs in Denmark. The couple feel they're getting the best of both worlds.

THEME

15.04.2012

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: TOMAS BERTELSEN

Every morning Swedish Per Andreasson and his wife get into their respective cars from their home in a cluster of newly built detached houses on the outskirts of Malmö. They head across the Øresund bridge. He to get to work as Chief Pricing & Underwriting Denmark at insurance company Codan's headquarters in downtown Copenhagen. She drives to Smørum north of Copenhagen, where she works as an audiologist at hearing aid producer Oticon.

"We've been doing this for many years now, and we love it. We feel we get the best of both Denmark and Sweden this way," says Per Andreasson.

The couple have been working in Denmark for 12 years. Per Andreasson's Danish working life began with the 1999 merger of the Danish insurance company Codan and Swedish Trygg-Hansa. At the time he was working in Stockholm, while his wife had got a job with Danish Oticon - which meant they would only see each other at weekends. So Per Andreasson suggested to his boss to move him to Copenhagen, and that's what happened. The couple became Danish - nearly:

"We bought a lovely house in Søborg, a sweet Copenhagen suburb, and put a lot of effort into becoming integrated. We had Danish friends, read Danish newspapers and celebrated

Shrove Tuesday with our children just like everyone else in our street. Those were good years," he remembers.

Home to Sweden

But when the children approached school age and the Øresund bridge had been built, it became tempting for the family to start looking to Sweden.

"We were leading an ordinary Danish life and did not think for one minute to move back to Sweden before it was time for our children to go to school. Even though I speak Danish well and know Danish society intimately, it always felt like a handicap when helping them do homework in a foreign language. By moving back to Sweden our parents could also help out."

With the Øresund bridge it suddenly became realistic to live in Sweden while working in Copenhagen. So the couple did an about turn and bought a brand new house in Sweden, just 500 metres from the bridge. And as Swedish housing and car prices were considerably lower than Danish ones, the couple could afford two cars. That meant Per Andreasson could get from the house to his Copenhagen office in just 40 minutes.

"Having one foot in each country works well. We have Copenhagen's cultural offerings close by and at the same time we can give our children the chance of growing up in a smaller city."

Around one in four of the families who live in the same neighbourhood as the Andreasson's are cross border commuters. And nearly half of the family's friends are Swedes who work in Denmark or Danes who have moved to Sweden and who work in Copenhagen.

Per Andreasson's youngest daughter was so small when the family moved from Denmark that she had still not learned to speak Danish. But she has learned it in Sweden, because her best friend who live in the neighbourhood has Danish parents.

More alike than different

Today Per Andreasson rarely thinks about the fact that he is Swedish while he's at work. Partly because some 50 Swedes are working at the Codan headquarters, partly because he speaks Danish and knows the cultural differences very well. But the first month was difficult, he recalls:

"When I came home each night I pretty much collapsed from being so tired."

The cultural and not least linguistic differences were in fact greater than he had expected.

"It's a pretty big challenge to penetrate deep into a foreign language, and this came as a bit of a surprise to me. It took a long time before I could understand conversations during breakfast in the canteen for instance. I really had to concen-

trate. And even after all these years I still come across new Danish words every week which I did not know before."

He would also come to realise that Danes are far more direct when talking to each other compared to Swedes. Danes will tell it to your face exactly what they think. In Sweden you tend to skirt around the issue rather than being direct or critical, thinks Per Andreasson, who set up a website about being Swedish in Denmark.

The site is no longer running and to him the similarities, not the differences, are now what seems the most striking:

"These days I often think how much we have in common and how similar are our ways of thinking and talking - even though we have the water and a national border between us."

Swedes cross-border commute to Denmark more than anyone

Thousands of people commute to Denmark from neighbouring countries to work - especially Swedes. But in times of crisis the number of cross-border commuters dwindles.

THEME

15.04.2012

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: MUSEUM LOLLAND-FALSTER, BORNHOLM MUSEUM

Most customers in Copenhagen shops are sometimes being served by Swedish shop workers, and guests at cafes and restaurants in the Nyhavn area are used to being served beer by Swedish speaking waiters. Swedes have overtaken Germans and Poles as the top cross border commuters to Denmark.

No other neighbouring country send as many cross-border commuters to work in Danish workplaces as Sweden at the moment. The latest commuter statistics from Denmark's National Labour Market Authority shows 13,253 Swedes commuted to and from Denmark in 2011 - the equivalent to 8,374 Danish full time jobs held down by Swedes.

Four years ago, southern neighbours Germany and Poland sent the most people across to Denmark to work. But cross border commuting to Denmark has fallen markedly in the wake of the economic crisis which hit Denmark in 2009.

Few Danes work in Sweden

In 2008 – before the crisis – 19,855 German commuters worked in Denmark (the equivalent to 10,911 full time jobs). Last year the number had been halved. In 2008 the number of Polish cross border commuters was nearly as big and that too has now been halved. Swedish cross border commuting has also fallen but not as much as the German and Polish commuting.

Swedes commuting to Denmark mainly work in retail, transport, in hotels and restaurants, in the health sector, as cleaners and knowledge workers. German cross border commuters work mainly in industry, the building and transport trade and to a lesser extent in retail and cleaning.

Danish employers hire far more Lithuanian commuters than before within agriculture and cleaning. Yet there are only some 3,000 Lithuanians who commute to Denmark to work, and very few commuted to Denmark from Estonia, Latvia, Norway, Finland and Iceland.

There are no statistics for how many Danes commute to neighbouring countries, but it is clear that the number of Danes commuting to Sweden is far lower than the number of Swedes commuting to Denmark. The Øresund Institute estimates just some 700 Danes commutes across Øresund to work on the Swedish side. On top of that a few Danes have moved permanently to Sweden because of lower costs of living.

New knowledge on Swedish cross border commuters

The fact that cross border commuting between Denmark and Sweden ebbs and flows with the state of the economy is nothing new, says the CEO at the Øresund Institute Anders Olshov. He points out that the number of Swedish cross border commuters sky-rocketed in the decade from 1999 to 2009, and that there is now a slight decrease.

A similar tendency is shown in a new report from the Nordic Council of Ministers: Cross border commuting from Sweden to Denmark and Norway between 2001 and 2008. The report, published by Statistics Norway, says a total of 47,000 people commuted from Sweden to Denmark and Norway in 2008 - an increase of 166 percent on 2001.

The report also looks closer at who the Swedish commuters are and where they live. Swedes who work in Denmark typically live in south-west Skåne, while Swedes working in Norway live more spread out across Sweden but with a certain concentration on the Västra Götaland region, Värmland and Dalarna counties.

Around half of the Swedish cross border commuters have finished college and a third has further education, especially managerial economists, technicians and nurses and doctors. More than one in four of Swedes who commuted to Denmark and Norway in 2008 were between 16 and 24.

Long tradition for cross border commuting

Swedish commuting to Denmark has a long history. According to the Danish Immigration Museum more than 81,500



Swedes immigrated into Denmark towards the end of the 1800s to find jobs in agriculture, as servants and in construction. Some other Swedes were hired as seasonal workers.

In order to avoid Swedish labour being exploited, an 1884 law stipulated that only Swedish citizens could recruit workers in Sweden. The workers were then sent to Denmark or northern Germany on boats in large groups, often in poor conditions. Most of the Swedish immigrants were young men and women from the countryside.

Swedish agricultural workers were hired for the cultivation of beets, which started in Denmark around 1870. From the 1880s farmers from Skåne started growing beets and Swedish labour in Danish beet fields was gradually replaced by eastern-European seasonal workers.



Some Swedish girls also worked as milkmaids or servants in the cities. During the 1800s around one in ten girl servants in Copenhagen were Swedish.

Some stayed on in Denmark and married Danish men. A range of special agreements between Denmark and Sweden during the 1880s and 1890s ensured special rights for Swedish immigrants. One such right was the access to poor relief after 12 years living in Denmark.

Commuting: Iceland's challenge and opportunity

Commuting is increasingly popular among Icelandic doctors, nurses and craftsmen. They are mainly commuting to Norway, but also to Sweden. Wage levels are important, but commuting from a small country like Iceland also means a chance to develop professionally.

THEME

15.04.2012

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR

Icelandic nurses commute between Iceland and Scandinavia, mostly to Norway. Elsa B. Friðfinnsdóttir, who heads the Icelandic Nurses' Association, says a survey shows seven percent of 2,800 union members have worked abroad in the past year:

"They have mainly been travelling for shorter periods of time to work abroad. More than 80 percent of the commuters went to Norway."

Commuting is popular

Wages remain an important factor when nurses decide to travel abroad to work. Friðfinnsdóttir has access only to a limited amount of research but she of course meets many nurses on a regular basis. According to Friðfinnsdóttir the nurses tell her they make large amounts of money in short amounts of time because of the weak Icelandic currency. She has noticed that commuting is very popular among those working in operating theatres, in intensive care and A&E in Iceland.

"Many consider going to Norway a form of further education," she says.

"They feel it is professionally rewarding and nice to change working environments and to try something new," says Friðfinnsdóttir.

Nurses say the work load is smaller in Norway than in Iceland.

"It's almost like going on holiday," says Friðfinnsdóttir.

Friðfinnsdóttir points out that the work load in Icelandic hospitals is enormous. If one nurse is off sick the others must work harder to perform his or her tasks. There is no legal overtime because of cuts in hospital budgets.

According to reports Friðfinnsdóttir has received from commuting nurses, Norwegian hospitals enjoy a higher level of staffing. This means fewer patients for each nurse in Norway compared to Iceland.

Commuting popular with doctors too

Nurses work a 40 hour week in Iceland. Many work 50 to 80 percent in permanent jobs which they usually want to keep. They are allowed to compress their working hours to take longer periods of time off in order to commute. They also use holidays for work commuting.

"That means they can work from ten days to three weeks in Norway before returning to their job in Iceland," says Friðfinnsdóttir.

This form of commuting is popular among Icelandic doctors too. Þorbjörn Jónsson is the president of the Icelandic Medical Association. Jónsson says the numbers show Icelandic doctors are moving abroad. The number of union members has dropped by 11 percent in the past two years. But these numbers do not take the commuting into account.

"Commuting has increased dramatically among doctors in the wake of the economic crisis in Iceland. It has become popular to commute," says Jónsson.

Many doctors work part time in Iceland and part time in Scandinavia. Sometimes a group of Icelandic doctors will share one or two practices in Scandinavia. They take turns to staff it. It is also popular to take locums abroad, especially in Sweden.

Bought Ophelia

Guðmundur Karl Snæbjörnsson is a general practitioner. He runs the job site Hvítir Sloppar which helps doctors, nurses and midwives find work - mainly in Sweden. The company has three offices in Sweden and one in Reykjavik.

Hvítir Sloppar cooperates with Skandinavisk Hälsovård (Scandinavian Healthcare), Svensk Närsjukvård (Swedish Local Healthcare) and MediCare. Snæbjörnsson's partner has also recently bought the Swedish company Ophelia which oversees the majority of the commuting market for nurses and midwives.

Snæbjörnsson himself spent his last study years in Sweden and has good contacts at hospitals and health centres, not least in the south of Sweden. He has found several hundreds of jobs for Icelandic health workers in recent years.

Demand is large. Sweden and Norway need health workers and Icelandic doctors have often spent the final years of studying in Scandinavia, which means they speak fluent Swedish or Norwegian.

"But we can also find work for Swedish or Norwegian doctors in Iceland," says Snæbjörnsson.

Swedish doctors to Iceland

Snæbjörnsson has big plans to increase workplace cooperation in the Nordic region. Icelandic radiologists with language skills should be able to investigate and analyse x-rays taken elsewhere in Scandinavia and send their results to hospitals in Norway, Sweden or Denmark.

There are talks of cooperation between several hospitals in Norway, Sweden and Denmark.

"This way we find working tasks for doctors," he says.

"It doesn't matter whether a radiologist is in Iceland or Sweden. All that doctors need to do their job is knowledge, experience and language skills."

Þóra Ágústsdóttir is Eures' advisor at Vinnumálastofnun, the Icelandic Directorate of Labour. She says Vinnumálastofnun cannot keep track of work commuting from Iceland. But Ágústsdóttir does regularly meet Icelanders who have permanent jobs and who are also interested in commuting to other Nordic countries.

"We don't have any figures but many ask us what possibilities exist. Our clients often attend courses run by Föreningen Norden (the Nordic Society) aimed at preparing Icelandic families for the move to Norway," says Ágústsdóttir.

It is often craftsmen of all skills who are interested in work in the Nordic region. Ágústsdóttir says it is common for the worker to go first to Norway while the family stays behind in Iceland until they have decided on their future. Many of the commuters are carpenters and electricians.

The currency makes it pay

Finnbjörn A. Hermannsson heads Samiðn - the Federation of Skilled Construction and Industrial Employees in Iceland. He says five percent of carpenters among their members

have moved abroad to work, but that even more commute between countries.

"Craftsmen generally travel abroad to work for set periods of time. In our experience they will sooner or later be forced to choose whether they stay abroad or in Iceland," says Hermannsson.

Kristján Þórður Snæbjarnarson is president of Iceland's main trade union representing electricians. Despite unemployment figures of two percent among Icelandic electricians, eight percent of the union's 5,000 members commute to other Nordic countries. They work for two weeks abroad and stay for one week in Iceland.

"Electricians are sought after in the Nordic region," says Snæbjarnarson.

"The Icelandic currency is weak and wages are good. So it pays for them to commute," he adds.

"I have also heard of electricians who want to escape from the situation in Iceland. They are tired of the negative debate here at home."

Iceland's Minister for Social Affairs Guðbjartur Hannesson does not consider this mobility to be a threat to Iceland. Iceland shares the same problems as the other Nordic countries. Swedish health professionals move to Norway, the same thing has happened in Denmark. Iceland's health professionals are moving away.

Many Icelandic doctors have specialised in Sweden. The Minister for Social Affairs Hannesson reckons they will be happy to move back to Iceland if they are offered good conditions. He points out that it can sometimes be difficult for health professionals to maintain their skills because of Iceland's small population.

"Doctor commuters are both a challenge and an opportunity for Iceland," he says.

"It is invaluable to Icelandic society that they are able to maintain their skills base and to increase their experience through working in other Nordic countries," he continues.



How about a personal trainer - for your brain?

The Nordic Labour Journal can now add another job to the list of new occupations: ‘personal brainer’. The title holder is Finnish Reidar Wasenius. He recently made a 20 years old dream come true and opened a training centre for brains - BRIIM Center - in Helsinki.

NEWS

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TEXT: CARL-GUSTAV LINDÉN, PHOTO: RICHARD NORDGREN

Wasenius, who used to work with product development at companies like Nokia and Samsung, and who was a teacher before that, has spent the past few years concentrating on brain training.

“I cried a bit this morning. This is something I’ve been thinking about for 22 years,” he says during the opening of his centre.

Wasenius feels the demands on modern employees are unsustainable and that people need help to relax and recharge their batteries.

People are expected to do many things simultaneously and still manage to perform each task to a high standard.

- They must make quick decisions based on poor information.
- They must constantly learn new things and remember a whole lot of details.
- They must be creative and innovative under stress - while being expected to keep their motivation and be positive.

This is unsustainable and within certain trades, like in IT, employees are having considerable problems.

“But I wanted to separate this from mental health. We work with people who have not been diagnosed with anything - we don’t promise anything - and we have not established any kind of centre of happiness.”



Wasenius focuses on strategies and concrete methods which anyone can use in order to train their memory and increase their ability to concentrate and to be mentally present. Sound, light, smell, shapes, human contact - all means are allowed. Play and games are important ingredients even if Wasenius is not convinced that anything will do.

“Sudoku is fun, but can it help you in your working life?”

He is also keen to kill off certain myths, like the one saying people are creative and others are not, or that our memory deteriorates with age.

Wasenius is convinced brain training, which mainly is about various types of learning, could become a protection against burning out. More than 100,000 Finns have been forced into early retirement because of mental problems or behavioural difficulties. They make up nearly half of all Finns on early retirement, and psychological problems are by far the most common reason.

The idea is for BRIIM Center, which is full of Finnish design, to go international. Wasenius plans to open similar centres in the Netherlands, Singapore and in Germany.