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Theme: Future labour market challenges



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Life-saving communication

The Corona pandemic continues its impact on Nordic citizens, who so far have supported their own governments and other authorities. In Iceland's second city Akureyri, party politics have even been put aside and all political parties have joined forces on the city council.

EDITORIAL

07.10.2020

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

"We began by agreeing on how to communicate," Hilda Jana Gísladóttir, who heads the social democratic party in the city, told the NLJ's Guðrún Helga Sigurðardóttir.

Many Nordic citizens look with horror at the polarisation ravaging the USA right now, where presidential debates are more about who can shout the loudest than what policies should be pursued. If you ask Icelanders, they at least do know what they want to see – 91% would have voted for Jo Biden as the next President of the USA if they could, and only 9% would have voted for Donald Trump, according to a survey carried out by Zenter on commission from Fréttablaðið.

Nordic politics are undergoing more of a split in various directions. More political parties are emerging, despite rules for minimum support in order to get into parliament. Some are leaving established parties to set up new ones, and some swap one party for another. Social media make it possible to gain attention for issues which established parties have been ignoring. In Norway, one such issue has been toll roads, which led to the setting up of a toll roads party, as you can read in Bjørn Lønnum Andreassen's report.

The Corona pandemic might have slowed this development down somewhat, but there is no doubt that it is harder for politicians to communicate to the electorate today, with far more channels and a rapid digital development that not everyone manages to keep up with. Many outside of politics are experiencing this too. Because technology is not enough.

"You need more than Zoom or Teams," writes Fayme Alm, who has taken a look at how video conferences are being made more professional. She has talked to Yasemin Arhan Modéer, and she also warns that too many online meetings can be detrimental to people's health.

"We have seen people attending seven to eight meetings a day with no break or food, and they burn out," says Yasemin Arhan Modéer.

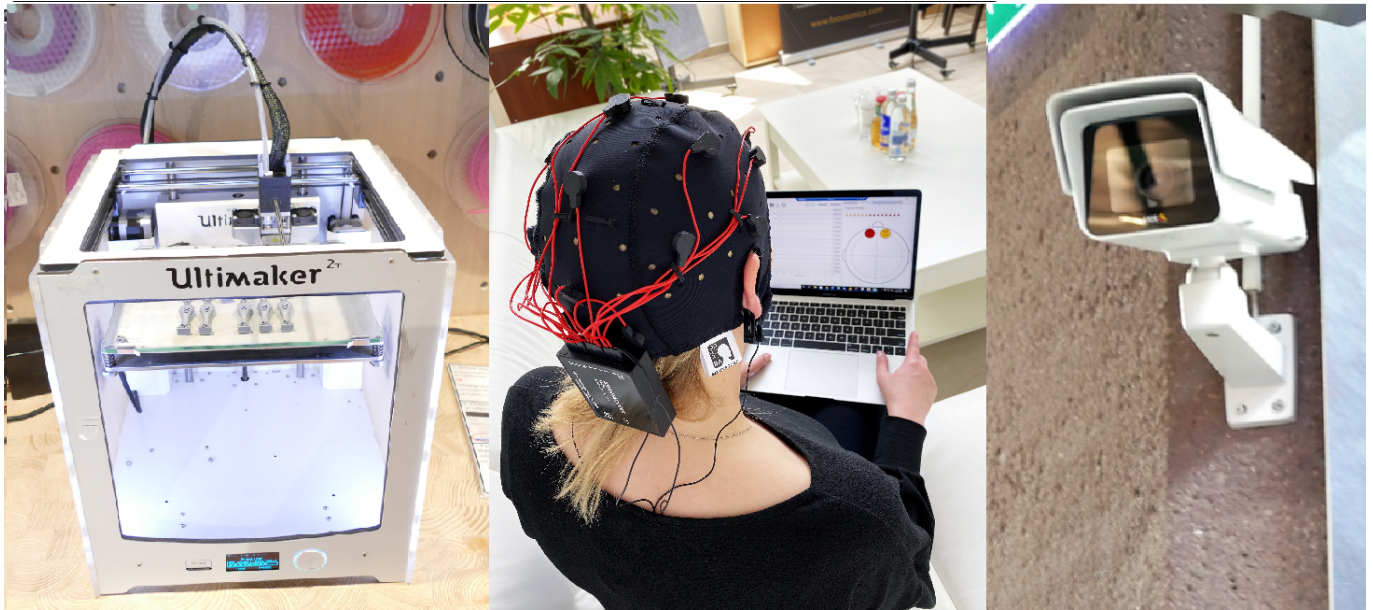
Nordic occupational health authorities have for several years had a group that studies what work environments might look like in future. They have now presented their report. Some of the technological development seems to come straight out of a science fiction movie – or how about controlling a computer with your thoughts? Other new technologies are more hands-on.

Gunhild Wallin has tested a Swedish-made robot glove which can give people who have lost movement in their hand new strength. It can also help industry workers avoid future work-related strain injuries. She describes how it feels to wear the glove and talks to the developers.

Denmark's government wants to execute a pension reform which would give people who started working at an early age the opportunity to retire early on a state pension, no matter what their doctor says. Marie Preisler has met a man and a woman in this group and explains why the reform has become a hot political potato in Denmark.

According to the Danish Minister of Employment Peter Hummelgaard, this is meant to help people who have performed hard physical work get a few good years as pensioners, after having struggled and paid their taxes for many years.

Moving money around can, of course, be tiring. Yet physical strain is not usually what hits the richest in society particularly hard. A new report from Statistics Norway shows that the richest Norwegians are considerably richer than what was previously thought. Lars Bevanger has the story from the people behind the report. The question is how long it will take before similar calculations are done in the other Nordic countries?



New challenges for work environments as technology and humans come together

The work environment of the future will be here sooner than we think, and it will be different from the one labour inspection authorities have been monitoring until now. A new Nordic report considers some threats that look like science fiction. Others are already a reality for many workers, yet we know little about these threats' long-term effects.

THEME

07.10.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The report looks at how Nordic labour inspection authorities might deal with new technology and issues that have negative – or positive – consequences for workers:

- Surveillance
- Working alongside robots
- Artificial Intelligence
- New tools, like 3D printers
- Work organisation
- Big Data

Finland commissioned the report and was instrumental in its execution. The Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health points out that the report is unique in several ways.

“First, the report focusses on occupational safety and health and labour inspection. This perspective is not common in future of work studies and analyses. Second, the report gives

practical recommendations for labour inspectorates. Third, the report provides an exclusive Nordic perspective on themes of regional and global importance in the context of labour inspection.

Four megatrends

Four megatrends influence work environments: new technology, an ageing population, globalisation and climate change. New work environment issues have emerged before. In the 1970s few people believed smoking in the workplace was a problem that labour inspectorates needed to care about.

Meanwhile, old problems remain too. Muscular and skeletal strain is something we will struggle with for many years to come. We are not even over the asbestos problem, because many construction workers still are exposed to this during the demolition or modernisation.



Electric scooters at Oslo's Karl Johan street

The speed of change has increased, however. A few years ago not many people had seen an electric scooter. Now Oslo's main A&E receive eight injuries caused by electric scooters every day. The opposite problem is inactivity – sedentary jobs are now considered to be one of Europe's biggest work environment challenges.

The report was written by the Nordic Future of Work Group, which is made up of specialists from the Nordic labour inspectorates. They started working in 2016. Because labour inspectors and other authorities have written the report, it is more concrete and to the point than many other research reports. This is what they write about the different issues mentioned above:

Surveillance

Surveillance of occupational health typically used to be conceived in terms of monitoring worker health and different work environment factors.

"However, with new forms of work and the technologies at hand, constant visual and digital surveillance of the worker is a reality. This is plausible through video cameras, apps and mobile devices including smart wearables.

"Although these technologies give employers the possibility to improve efficiency and monitor the safety of the workers, they also provide the opportunity for constant control and incessant performance evaluations. Such ceaseless intrusion of privacy could be detrimental to the psychosocial health of workers."

Working with robots

Workers and industrial robots have traditionally been working together, but separated from each other – a robot might for instance be inside a steel cage. But soon it will be possible to use prosthetics, giving humans the power to do more. Many occupations will introduce robots that work in tandem with a human, sometimes known as "cobots" (from collaborative robots). So far workers have had limited experience with working together with robots. Robots working with the same tasks as humans can lead to anything from risk of collisions to psychological consequences.



The robot Asimo has been developed by the Japanese Honda corporation. Here two robots are serving food. Asimo can recognise ten different people and address them by name. It can identify moving objects, people's posture and their gestures. Photo: Honda

"Working alone with robots who possess both physical strength and emotional intelligence might be a challenging proposition," write the report's authors.

An artificial exoskeleton is a kind of suit which can be used to protect people working in dangerous environments, or to increase a worker's strength.

Exoskeletons that are not a perfect fit can result in too much pressure on nerves, disproportionate strain on the spine or compression of the chest, warn the authors.

Artificial intelligence

An increasing number of tasks are influenced or driven by artificial intelligence (AI). It might be in the form of which Uber driver gets a passenger, which diagnosis is made or which people are hired.

"The software program coding utilised in these technologies is not accessible to outsiders or inspectors; only the coding personnel who design these technologies have access to it and know how it works. Thus, assessment, evaluation and decision making based on AI is not necessarily transparent," write the authors.

Problems can emerge when AI starts being used if the information supplied to the process by humans is wrong from the start. This will then only be amplified over time.

Big Data

New technology can also be used by labour inspectorates, of course, to discover risks faster and to help a business focus. Only a small selection of all companies and businesses can be controlled, so it is important to choose the ones with the largest risks. The size of the workplace, the number of different nationalities who work there and workers' experience all influence the risk of accidents.

The report received a lot of positive feedback when it was presented during a webinar.

“This report comes at the same time as 11 other EU countries are about to review their work with occupational health,” said William Cockburn, Head of the Research Unit at the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, EU-OSHA.

“The report is really timely since the EU is about to develop a new work environment strategy post-2020,” said Charlotte Grevfors Ernoult, Head of the EU Senior Labour Inspectors Committee Unit (SLIC)

“This report is the first of its kind and it is pretty relevant to other countries besides the Nordics,” said Joaquin Nunes, Head of Department for Inspection Activities Support at ILO.

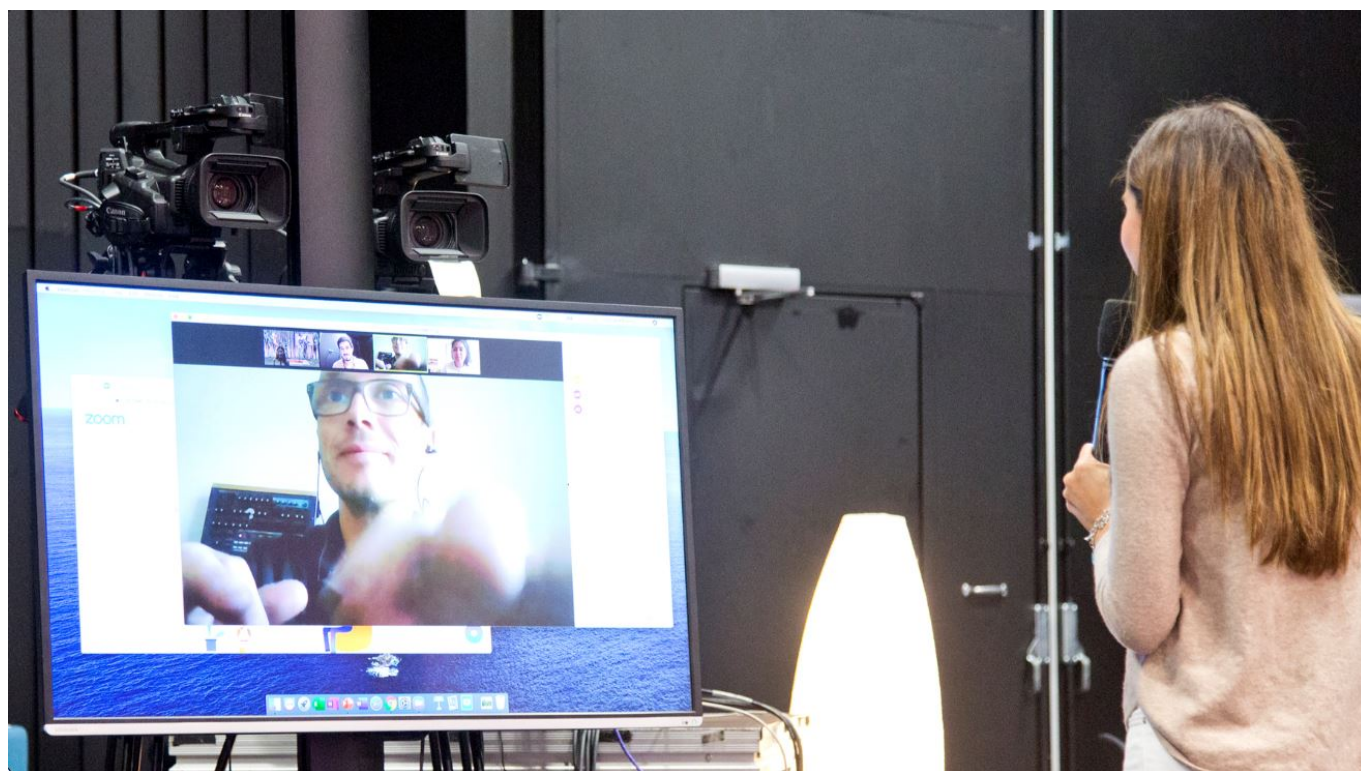
72 recommendations

So what recommendations does the report present? Altogether there are 72 different ones, outlining what labour inspectorates can do. Some are of a general nature, like developing new indicators that also include what is happening in the platform economy and working tasks impacted by new technology.

Other recommendations are more specific, like developing methods for how people working from home can help map work environment risks themselves, observe regular working hours and report potential stress and strain to their employers.

The only recommendation that came in for some criticism during the webinar was to increase cooperation with new organisations representing sole traders, or those who carry out digital or globalised working tasks.

“Why do we always think new situations need new solutions? If we don’t cooperate with representative organisations we risk seeing those leading the new organisation only speak up for themselves,” said Kris de Meester, senior advisor at Business Europe.



Video conferences – from added bonus to necessity

You need more than Zoom or Teams. That has become obvious to many businesses as the pandemic has forced most meetings online. As people are getting used to the technology, newly gained experience becomes useful knowledge.

THEME

07.10.2020

TEXT: FAYME ALM, PHOTO KARIN ODDNER

The more or less instant restrictions imposed by Nordic governments this spring meant we rapidly needed to change the way we work. There were restrictions to the number of people who could meet and to cross-border travel.

The Nordic Labour Journal spoke to three people who all have been taking part in video conferences with others from more than one Nordic country. Yasemin Arhan Modéer is the CEO of Altitude Meetings, a Malmö-based company specialising in planning and executing meetings and conferences.



“Digital meetings went from being an available added tool to a necessity for companies. Not everyone was ready for the fact that an online meeting must be done in a different way than a meeting where participants can physically meet,” she says.

More planning

Her company often operates across borders with other Nordic businesses as well as in other European countries and beyond, where video conferencing has been working well.

“Here, as in other conference settings, we see no obstacles and try to highlight the advantages of online meetings. Video conferences need the same level of planning as physical gatherings, regardless of how many participants there are.”

Online meetings should also have a clear purpose and a realistic schedule, plus an invite and a well-defined agenda. The technology must be solid and people need to be aware of how they look on camera.

“You need to figure out how to use space in the best possible way, similar to how you would approach issues like air quality and lighting during physical meetings. We don’t want to be distracted by children’s drawings on fridge doors or be left with an image of a person’s forehead, if they are perhaps not as used to appearing on a screen as those who have been doing online videos since they were children,” says Yasemin Arhan Modéer.

To achieve a successful online meeting it is also important to map and establish the participants’ roles – like who should be responsible for the technical aspects in order to avoid unnecessary interference.

Response and interactivity

Being an online moderator is different from being a moderator in front of a physical audience. Choosing the right moderator could make or break the video conference, points out Yasemin Arhan Modéer.



“If the moderator is used to getting feedback from physically present participants, you might have a problem when 90% of

them are invisible. So a video conference needs a moderator who knows how to handle the online reality.”

Modern technology allows for response and interactivity. Yasemin Arhan Modéer mentions Jamboard, a digital whiteboard with “post-it notes” where participants can map out ideas, save them in the cloud and make them accessible for all.

“When everyone has cloud access and can move a note around, the process becomes more including,” says Yasemin Arhan Modéer, and adds that the choice of process leader can make a difference in an activity like this one.

Another possibility is to set up a chat where participants can present their views in writing rather than orally. The chat also makes it possible to find people who share your particular interest or to find an answer to a specific question.

“Many will dare to write stuff that they would never have said out loud in a physical meeting. They might find it difficult to talk in front of other people, but here they don’t feel they are being stared at,” says Yasemin Arhan Modéer.

Several advantages

Video conferencing clearly has some advantages. People save both time and the environment because they no longer need to travel to attend. Yasemin Arhan Modéer sees another benefit.

“I think we are beginning to value shared physical workspaces to a greater extent. When everyone is together, the company can build on and strengthen team spirit, which is so important to cohesion,” she says.

“Another benefit is the type of inclusion which can emerge when physical meetings are replaced by digital ones,” says Yasemin Arhan Modéer and mentions “*Istället för Almedalen*” (Instead of Almedalen) which her company created when the Almedalen annual weeklong political event in Visby was cancelled.

“Suddenly you see people taking part who cannot afford to travel to the event in Gotland.”

But Yasemin Arhan Modéer also warns against inviting the same person to attend too many video conferences in one day.

“We have seen people attending seven to eight meetings a day with no break or food, and they burn out,” says Yasemin Arhan Modéer.

Christian Tangkjær has seen the same. He is a partner with Mobilize-Nordic Consulting, which specialises in knowledge-intensive organisation. He is also an external lecturer at the Copenhagen Business School.

“During the spring, video conferences became an experience for many, something we had not tried before. I know of several people here in Denmark who went from one long video conference to another without changing rooms, which meant they didn’t get the mental change this usually provides. They then kept working through the evening.”

Christian Tangkjær thinks attitudes have changed this autumn. While more and more feel comfortable with the technology and can quickly jump on an online meeting, the insight into time usage has also grown.

“A video conference throws us straight in without any introductory socialisation, and I think that more and more people now realise that there is a need for breaks in between meetings,” he says.

Rapid change demands flexibility

Christian Tangkjær uses a concrete example of how his consultancy firm’s flexibility has been tested. He and a colleague were due to host a one-day seminar where all participants were to meet on Funen. But a few days before, the Danish government introduced new restrictions, he says.

“We had planned for the participants to discuss in groups, and this actually worked well digitally too, using Zoom’s Breakout Rooms function, a format we had tried out before and got better at through experience. After the group session, the plenary meetings turned out to be really good.”

Breaking down borders

For a Nordic company like Mobilize-Nordic Consulting, the corona pandemic has been particularly challenging, just like it has been for many companies operating across more than one country. But Christian Tangkjær has seen how digital meetings have linked the Nordic countries together and have made it easier to meet more often. This is something he also hears from the company’s customers.

“One researcher said we had intensified our cooperation across national borders because of the pandemic. And perhaps it has made the world smaller and communication faster. We will definitely make good use of the experiences we have gained through our digital meetings,” says Christian Tangkjær.

Danish-Swedish workshop on hold

The Interreg project Fördomsfönster Öresund wants to “increase the number of cross border commuters in the Öresund region by finding work for 50 foreign-born or second-generation Swedes in Denmark”. In spring, 100 Danish and Swedish employers were interviewed digitally without problems. However, the project’s workshops have been postponed because of the pandemic and because Danish restrictions have stopped foreign-born, non-Swedish citizens from travelling.

“This is the personal meeting that allows our candidates to develop their self-confidence. We share facts and practical information in our workshops, but more important are the exercises where participants can reflect on attitudes and prejudices. Some of this can be done online, but some things do not translate well,” says Magdalena Nour, who heads Fördomsfönster Öresund.

She is also the Managing Director for Swedish Mine – Mentorship, Inspiration, Networking and Education. Mine runs the project which is 50% financed by Interreg Öresund-Skagerack-Kattegatt together with Lund University and the Nordic Association.

“We hope to be able to run one of our workshops in December and two more in spring,” says Magdalena Nour.

“Perhaps we will have to do them online in the end, but for now we wait and see.”

As the project group continues to analyse what misgivings employers on both sides of the Sound might have about hiring foreign-born workers – is there anything in particular that sets them apart?

“The work meetings happen on people’s computer screens. These too seem to work well,” says Magdalena Nour.

Hiring despite closed border

Despite Covid-19 and the restrictions in its wake, 50 Malmö academics who have participated in the Interreg project have been hired. Some got jobs in Denmark, others in Sweden, says Magdalena Nour.

“Candidates who could document they already had an interview in Denmark were allowed in, but we don’t know who have attended a physical interview and who have done online ones. Danish employers have made their own decisions. They can be very pragmatic,” says Magdalena Nour.



Extra power with robot gloves

The Stockholm-based company Bioservo marries medical research with new technology with their robot glove. It gives extra muscle power to people with reduced hand function and for those whose jobs put a strain on their hands. This summer they won NASA's invention award.

THEME

07.10.2020

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: DENNY LORENTZEN

“We won because this is an invention which has been commercialised and it has become important to industry,” says Mikael Wester, who has been Bioservo's Head of Marketing since January this year.

After many years in development, the robot glove has been getting increasing attention, not least after the company also launched Ironhand, a glove that has been developed to prevent work-related industrial injuries. Bioservo is now pursuing two tracks – the glove Carbonhand, which targets people with hand injuries that stops them from performing everyday tasks, and the stronger Ironhand which can help alleviate strain on muscles in the hand during heavy lifting and monotonous industrial working tasks.



The robot glove gives a stronger grip but does not make you lift heavier items than normally.

“The fact that our glove contributes to a sustainable workplace has helped speed up the development. The glove can help older employees work longer. Our product is also up to date because it is online and can easily be adjusted to deal with different production tasks,” says Mikael Wester.

Medical knowledge meets new technology

The robot glove story starts back in 2006 at Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. Neurosurgeon Hans von Holst meets many stroke patients whose illness damages their hands and musculature. This makes everyday life very difficult. It can be hard to get rest, eat or move around without a cane or walking frame.

Hans von Holst’s idea is to help patients as early as possible to rebuild their strength by giving the muscles extra power through an exoskeleton. He gets in touch with researchers at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology. It is the start of a long-term cooperation between medical and technical expertise. In 2013 the first glove is presented. It is called “soft extra muscle glove”, shorten to SEM-glove. Today it is called Carbonhand. It is now being used as an aid and can be funded through the Swedish Social Insurance Agency, the Swedish Public Employment Service or through the national health-care system.

“Interest in Sweden has been less than we hoped for. However, we see that Norway is more generous with physical aids and quicker to prescribe these. It also helps that the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration NAV manages requests for physical aids centrally,” says Mikael Wester.

Little by little, the idea to develop a stronger robot glove grew, one that also could be used in industry. They started cooperating with General Motors and NASA, and in 2017 their first Ironhand prototype was ready. Beyond acting as a relief for the muscles in the hand, it can also store information and the entire cycle of a working task. What does the grip look like? Is it correct? At what point is the strain the greatest? How is power distributed to the fingers?

A serious work environment issue

The company is now working with even more global companies, including aircraft manufacturer Airbus, the French civil engineering construction company Eiffage and other companies in the car and construction industries. The need is great. Only in the EU, some 40 million workers suffer from work-related muscular damage, and 48% of workers at the car companies that cooperate with Bioservo have work-related hand problems.

“A woman at the [Volvo] Torslanda factory tried our glove and did not want to let it go. She told us her hands ached every day when she left work. Another car worker at GM who

used Ironhand summed up his experience by saying ‘Finally I don’t have to take painkillers at lunch’,” says Mikael Wester.



On the table in the small conference room in the company’s Kista office lies a pair of Ironhand. There is also a small backpack which houses the power unit that reads the glove’s sensors and gathers data. I put on the glove. It is not difficult and it feels good on the hand. I pick up an electric drill. The glove’s sensors immediately register my grip. They send signals to the power unit which starts whirring away, and I feel how the fingers that grip the drill are given extra power.

The muscles are strengthened and as soon as I adjust my grip the glove adjusts the added power. Wearing the glove with the system running makes it easier to understand how it works. The sensors register my movements and adapt accordingly. The glove can also be calibrated to be more static, which could help someone who must hold a sanding machine for hours. There is also an app which allows the user to control which fingers get extra muscle power, and how much.

A large screen on the wall shows a powerful woman with movie-star looks wearing a robot glove and backpack. Mikael Wester laughs and says that Ironhand sometimes gets mixed up with the film Ironman.

“But our robot glove does not mean the user can lift heavier burdens. It is the hand itself that gets stronger.”

Continuous development

The robot gloves are still not being mass-produced. The power units are made by subcontractors, but the gloves themselves are made at the Kista headquarters where there are sewing machines, rolls of thread, cables and much besides – all needed to make complete gloves. This is also where the gloves are continuously being developed to make them more intuitive and adaptable. There is cooperation between different experts in industrial design and technology.

Some of the cooperation with industry is kept secret.

“My idea is that we could use data from Ironhand to identify production issues which a company might want to cover up

if they decide not to do anything about them. This is also a question of integrity. An employer can analyse data and conclude that an employee ought to work faster. But there is no gathering of personal data, everything is anonymised,” says Mikael Wester.

Long-term sick leave costs more than rehab

Each glove costs around 65,000 Swedish kronor (€6,170), including all systems. In comparison, sick-leave and rehabilitation from hand damage cost ten times more, according to Mikael Wester, who refers to American research.

The company has been listed on Nasdaq since 2017, and income comes from a mix of private investments, research grants – including from the EU – and sales. There is soon enough evidence to say the gloves are both rehabilitating and preventative, says Mikael Wester. A range of marketing channels were ready to go just as the Corona pandemic paralysed the world.

“Everything stopped and several projects could not be finalised or were postponed, not least in the US car industry. But now things are starting to move again,” says Mikael Wester.



Danish state pension reform aims to help worn-out workers

The Danish government believes people should have the right to retire early on a state pension if they have been working since they were teenagers. Trade unions are rejoicing while employers and others have their doubts.

THEME

07.10.2020

TEXT MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: THOMAS BERTELSEN

The word “fairness” is being used frequently in the current debate about the Danish pension system. The issue is how the system should be adjusted to make sure the labour force is large enough while people who are worn out before they reach a state pensionable age are being looked after.

Arne Juhl is one of those people. A brewery worker with bad knees, he has become famous due to playing a lead in the Social Democrats’ 2019 parliamentary election campaign. Under the slogan “It is Arne’s turn”, the Social Democrats promised that if they won they would introduce the right to an early retirement for people like Arne Juhl, who started working at 16 and now has bad knees and other ailments. Af-

ter a long working life with hard physical work, he is unable to carry on working full-time.



One year after the election, the Social Democrat-led coalition government has presented its proposal for a pension for Arne Juhl and others who started working at a very early age. If you have worked for at least 42 years when you reach 61, you have the right to retire on a state pension one to three years earlier than other people. You also do not need a doctor's certificate to show you are unable to work. If the government can secure a majority in parliament for its proposal, Arne Juhl can get his state pension three years earlier than other people his age – allowing him to retire at 64 rather than at 67.

Mixed reception

The early retirement proposal has had a mixed reception. It is expensive and it goes against the trend that has dominated Danish politics over the past 15 years; getting Danes to work even longer before they can retire.

People living longer leads to an ageing population with fewer people of employable age. This is expensive for society and means labour shortages in many sectors – including health care, child care and care for the elderly.

To avoid that scenario, a majority in parliament decided back in 2006 to gradually increase the pensionable age in line with the increase in the average age. Everyone in Denmark is entitled to a state pension from the age of 66. In two years time you have to be 67 and if the average age continues to rise Danes will only receive their state pension at 72 by the year 2050.

At the same time, other public benefits that used to allow many older people to retire early have been gradually cut, for instance the voluntary early retirement scheme.

The government's decision to allow a group of people to retire early has therefore been criticised by employers and others for being a very unfortunate change of direction in light of the need to keep Danes working longer into their old age.

A new course or an exception

The government and trade unions reject that interpretation, arguing the proposal is an exception from the principle of one common state pension age, and from the trend towards a longer-lasting working life.

Launching the early retirement proposal, Minister of Employment Peter Hummelgaard explained that the point was to create a more equal pension system.

“Right now Danes retire at the same age regardless of when they started working and in what kind of job. This is not fair. That is why we want to introduce a new right to early retirement for people who started working at an early age and who have performed many years of what is often hard physical work.

“They should be able to retire before their pains grow too severe or working life becomes too hard. It should go without saying that they deserve a few good years as pensioners when they have toiled away and paid their taxes for so many years.”

Both the government and the trade unions have argued that many of those who have been working hard for many years are likely to enjoy fewer, healthy years in retirement. That argument is dismissed by the Kraka think-tank. There is no clear link between many years in the labour market and fewer expected years in retirement, according to Kraka's analysis. The government's proposal could in fact give people like Arne Juhl the highest number of expected years in retirement out of all pensioners, Kraka says.

Let the doctor decide

If the government wants to reduce inequality in the number of years people get in retirement, it should do it in a very different way, recommends Kraka.

“If the aim is to reduce inequality in the expected number of years on a pension, it would make sense to use professional health advice when granting someone early retirement.”

The Confederation of Danish Employers DA agrees with Kraka and recommends a more tailored access to early retirement for older workers so that only those who have a documented need to retire get to do so. This would cost a fraction of the government's proposed early state retirement scheme, believes DA.

The government's proposal has also been criticised for supporting only a small minority of people who really are tired after many years in the labour market. Some also wonder what would happen to the groups of people who are outside of the labour market due to chronic disease for instance, and who are therefore receiving sick pay, unemployment benefit or are in subsidised jobs or on the voluntary early retirement scheme. Would it not be better to grant them an early state pension?



I will work for as long as possible

64-year-old Jan Hansen has been working since he started out as an apprentice for a carpenter at 17. He has been through a knee operation and is waiting for another one, but does not long for the day he retires.

THEME

07.10.2020

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: TOMAS BERTELSEN

Jan Hansen loves his job as a partner at a small two-person carpentry company, and would refuse an early state pension if one was offered to him.

“I like creating beautiful things that people can enjoy and that not everyone can make, and I enjoy talking to my customers and my partner at the company. So I am in no rush to retire if my body holds up.”

A lot of heavy lifting and working on his knees has been tough on his legs. At 62 he had a knee replacement and wondered whether he would regain full use of his leg. Only three months after the operation he had retrained the knee and was back working "at full speed", he explains.

Putting off retirement

Now his other knee hurts so much that he expects he will have it replaced in a couple of months. If that operation goes well, his plan is to carry on working full-time until he turns 67 and a half and can draw a state pension. That is three years away, and he wouldn't mind working beyond that if he is still healthy.

“Working has always been and still is a very large part of my life, so I definitely don't look forward to retiring and I don't want to think about it. I guess I am avoiding it because it is not a nice thought.”

He likes the government's plan to offer early retirement to people who started working at an early age, even though he

himself is not interested. But he doubts whether early retirement will benefit those who really need it.

“It’s a good idea, but the government’s proposed scheme is narrow and will benefit just a few. I know craftsmen who are physically worn out but who have not been long enough in the labour market to be part of the scheme. Some of them have to retrain late in life instead, although they don’t want to. I am happy that is not me.”

More part-time work

He has never during his long working life considered getting another education, not even when his knees have hurt the most. Yet he wouldn’t mind reducing his weekly hours a bit in a few years when he approaches the end of his working life. Right now he puts in 37 hours a week, plus the necessary office work that comes with running a company.

He could work less as he is a sole trader and is able to decide which and how many tasks he will accept, and he would like to see part-time work being an available option for senior workers who do not have that opportunity today.

“I don’t know anyone my age who wants to completely stop working and do nothing or play golf if they were able to carry on working reduced hours instead. When you’re in your 60s and 70s you have a lot of experience, and this could be used better if the labour market offered a better opportunity to work part-time.”

Jan Hansen’s wife Mona has worked as a sandwich maker since she was 14. Like him, she likes her job, but she is eight years his junior and an early state pension could be an option for her.

“That is something we will consider,” says Jan Hansen.



I should have retrained

60-year-old Lone Høgh has been on painkillers for years in order to handle her physically demanding agricultural job. She has now retired in order to enjoy her time with her husband and dog.

THEME

07.10.2020

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER

Lone Høgh does things properly and never gives up when faced with something difficult. So without complaining, she has been lifting heavy bags, large bales and pigs in her agriculture job since she was 16.

“I grew up in the city but was interested in horses. So I became a student of agriculture at a farm that was near both the forest and the sea. It felt like coming home with all that light and fresh air. It was a pig far, and I have been working with that since.”

For many years she worked on a farm with 550 sows that produce around 18,000 piglets a year. One of her jobs was to vaccinate them all, which meant a lot of lifting and back twisting. She has also been cleaning out pigsties with a high-pressure washer, which is particularly tough on the arms and

shoulders. She was also under constant time pressure, as a strained economic situation in the agriculture sector means there are not enough workers to perform all the tasks, she says.

The physically demanding work has left her with clear physical marks.

“I have osteochondrosis and cannot use my back properly. I have had several collapsed disks. For many years I had to use painkillers in order to get through the day, and I was in such pain that I couldn’t go for a walk in my spare time,” says Lone Høgh.

Able to walk again

This summer she faced the consequences of her many physical ailments and quit her job in order to spend time with her husband Peder. He retired from his job as a police officer a couple of years ago. Lone Høgh will have to wait six and a half years before she gets her state pension.

And even though she has been working for 44 years she will probably not qualify for the government's new early retirement scheme because she worked freelance during some periods. So she chose to stop working without a state pension. She will draw on her own private pension until she reaches the state pensionable age.

"I realised that working until 67 and getting the state pension would mean there would be little left of me. So I have chosen to stop working now in order to get a few good years together with my husband while my body still works."

She soon realised this was the right decision for her body.

"I no longer need to take painkillers, I walk 70 kilometres a week and have been on a walking holiday with my daughter this summer. I thought I'd never be able to do that again."

Despite her demanding job, Lone Høgh has always prioritised an active lifestyle. She is a keen gardener and is active in voluntary organisations. That is why the transition from working life has not felt difficult, she says.

"I have seen others retire and disappear because they suddenly have nothing to do. I have always enjoyed everything life has to offer, even though my body ached."

Early retirement is fair

With the benefit of hindsight, Lone Høgh wishes she had not stayed in agriculture for so many years. If she could have her time again, she would have retrained when she was in her 40s and her body really started aching.

"It annoys me that I didn't retrain at that time. It would have saved me from much physical suffering. I could have chosen an education allowing me to work outside and with gardening, which is my great passion. But back then, I did not imagine that my hobby could perhaps also be a job."

Lone Høgh thinks it is totally reasonable that the government want to offer an early state retirement for people with a long working life.

"I cannot benefit from this myself as I have chosen to quit work at 60. But I do think it is fair to introduce an early retirement for people like me, who started working at a young age. It is not fair that we should retire as late as people who studied and perhaps did not start working until they were nearly 30."



Akureyri's "unity government" to tackle the crisis

All five political parties on the city council of Northern Iceland's largest city, Akureyri, have formed a coalition. Until the next election, they must work together to tackle the crisis created by the Corona pandemic and the loss of tourism income.

NEWS

07.10.2020

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR

"We could call the municipal cooperation in Akureyri a "unity government". At this early stage, it is difficult not to support the idea. The city councillors will work together on making difficult decisions. This is something we recognise from co-operation on a national government level elsewhere in Europe, where unity governments have been formed in the face of a crisis," says Professor Grétar Þór Eyþórsson at the University of Akureyri.

More humane politics

Hilda Jana Gísladóttir heads the social democratic party in Akureyri. She says the decision to form a unity government has a long history. Different parties and individual politicians have had different opinions. City councillors have long been

talking about how to improve politics and make it more humane, efficient and better. There has also been a debate about whether Akureyri should try voting for individuals rather than for political parties.



Akureyri politicians have decided to put party politics to one side and cooperate to solve the crisis which has emerged in the wake of the Corona pandemic.

"But cooperation has been really good over the past ten years. We started the election period by agreeing on a communication plan – treating each other with respect in debates and avoid hard conflicts in the city council and in debates. We want to exchange opinions in a rational and good way," explains Hilda Jana.

She thinks it is a good idea to start discussing the communication. The focus has been on information and active information flow. Everyone gets the same information at once – city councillors, the mayor and other managers – because it is important that they all take part in the decision-making process.

Agreeing to changes

When the Corona pandemic broke out, it quickly became apparent that Iceland's municipalities would be facing financial problems as a result. Hilda Jana says this led to a debate in Akureyri about how councillors could agree to changes without conflict. There are just 18 months left of the current term, and it is important to use that time in the most efficient way.

"Everyone agreed to protect vulnerable groups, prioritise children and young people, focus on public communication, make sure the municipality follows a sustainable strategy and so on.



"We decided to see whether this would work. It does not mean that everyone has to agree on everything, but both the majority and minority must be heard. There are no blocks along party political lines, everyone votes according to their own conscience," she says.

A previous unity government

Professor Grétar Þór Eyþórsson says Akureyri city councillors have a good history when it comes to cooperating. The political atmosphere has been good and without conflicts. A unity government was formed once before in 1946. In fact, party politics in smaller municipalities rarely dominate.



"There are often few disagreements and they do not follow party political lines in municipalities and smaller cities. But you do find differences in opinion between different councillors on different issues," the Professor explains.

Councillors in Iceland's largest cities have been working along party political lines, however. The parties have their candidates and the parties have had their councillors in the councils. But in municipalities of less than 1,000 to 2,000 citizens, party politics are less visible. People have had their

own independent electoral lists. Professor Grétar Þór Eyþórsson thinks this reduces the numbers of problems in district councils.

Politics as theatre

Hilda Jana is happy with the Akureyri experience of a unity government so far. She thinks politics is often presented as a play with winners and losers. Politics has so far been about trying to secure as much power as possible. She thinks many voters experience politics as a theatre piece with not enough information.

"That is not the way it should be," she says.

"That is why we have used to vote for those we agree with. But in politics, the politicians are sat in a room with information which they do not want to share. That is also not the way it should be. Everyone knows that we need to change politics."

Discussing solutions

The Akureyri unity government is a pilot. Hilda Jana thinks mistakes will be made but the aim is to find ways in which to make politics better. The unity government pilot will not necessarily solve the economic problems by itself, but it will hopefully become easier to find solutions and make good decisions.

Professor Grétar Þór Eyþórsson does not think unity governments will become popular in Iceland going forward, despite the Akureyri initiative. He does not believe it will be possible to establish unity governments in the capital region. But it will be exciting to see how things pan out in Akureyri. He guesses that this winter's snow clearing will be the first hot potato for the city councillors – where and how fast should the snow be cleared?



Winters can be rough in Northern Iceland. Snow clearing is one of the areas where Akureyri aims to save money. Photo: Akureyri municipality.



Anti toll road party second biggest in Bergen

Old political parties which spend years gathering too few votes fail to engage generations, while new one-issue parties are emerging. Political constellations change while we are waiting to see who might gain some power.

NEWS

07.10.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

Geir Lippestad is known as the defence lawyer representing the 22 July Oslo and Utøya terrorist. He has also represented the Labour Party on the Oslo city council. Now he is launching the new party Sentrum. One of his co-founders is John Harald Bondevik, son of former Prime Minister and leader of the Christian Democratic Party (KrF) Kjell Magne Bondevik.

So far, many in the party are former KrF members from the party's left. Lippestad is overwhelmed by the launch. He does not want to say anything about possible trends but thinks something is clearly missing when old parties fail to attract votes for years.



Geir Lippestad heads the new political party Sentrum after leaving the Labour Party in Oslo.

“100,000 people with reduced mobility are without work and this has been happening for many years without anyone doing anything about it politically. We believe there is a need for a new party and we have gathered many of the 5,000 physical signatures needed to get going incredibly fast. We will be independent from the traditional right and left blocks, but right now we support Jonas Gahr Støre (Labour) as the new Prime Minister of Norway. We are now a centre-left party,” Lippestad told the Nordic Labour Journal.

“The party’s gene”

“Issues that are important to us include climate change and the fight against exclusion. It’s in our DNA. We are talking about wholeness, and believe you need to include industrial politics, ownership and how we should invest in Norway. We will have a different industry apart from oil exploration in 15 years from now. We have to take international responsibility, for instance for the refugees in the Moria camp,” he says, and confirms that Sentrum is expected to be a pro-EU party.

When asked whether it would perhaps be better to merge political parties in a relatively sparsely populated country like Norway, he points to diversity.

“The fact that we have so many parties shows the breadth of our living democracy.”

Toll roads – one issue

One example of a one-issue party that has spiced up traditional politics in Bergen, Norway’s second city, is the People’s Movement No to More Toll (FNB). Cesilie Tveit was one of 11 members elected to the city council one year ago.



The People’s Movement No to more Toll became the second largest on Bergen city council in the 2019 municipal elections. Cesilie Tveit is one of the 11 members who are now helping run Bergen politics.

“We are a grown-up group of people with broad experience from working life, and this has been a major advantage. We sit on various committees and with our experiences from working life we can contribute well politically. So we are

more than a one-issue party. The committees benefit from our real-life experiences, and the administration and other politicians are very generous in my experience. They see that we are capable and willing to improve our city,” she says, but refuses to firmly put the party on the right or left.

“We are in ‘the centre’. We cooperate with several parties to secure votes for an issue, and we have at least as many issues on the red [left] as the blue [conservative] side. Issues are more important than supporting one political block or another. We can establish a party because the democracy is working.”

Better understood

Harald Hove is the head of the Conservative group in the Bergen city council. He believes FNB has a lot of credibility on one issue.

“This is perhaps the one-issue parties’ big problem. In the more established parties we can change the way we talk so that others will understand, and not speak in a nerdy tribal language,” says Hove.

“In the established parties we have not given good enough answers to issues that have engaged voters, and voters might have got angry and taken their vote elsewhere,” says Hove. The pensioners’ party and the Greens are two other new parties on the Bergen city council.

Crossing over

The Centre Party’s (SP) team in Oslo is also growing, as the MP Jan Böhler has chosen to leave Labour and accept SP’s first place on the list for next year’s parliamentary elections. Böhler is a high-profile Oslo politician who could help lift important issues for SP in Oslo and nationally, according to the party. Böhler has traditionally often cooperated with the Centre Party.



Norway's richest are richer than we thought

Top leaders on dizzyingly high salaries who pay little tax. A small elite who takes home a big chunk of the national income. No, we are not talking about the USA or the UK – this is Norway in 2020, according to Statistics Norway.

NEWS

07.10.2020

TEKST: LARS BEVANGER

Norway and other Nordic countries habitually tower high in various international rankings for happiness and social justice. This is often explained as a result of the countries' equal distribution of wealth.

"Countries with a lot of equality work better and people are simply happier, while big differences create problems," Marie Simonsen, political editor at Dagbladet, told the newspaper's own podcast Rett På.

Yet new figures from Statistics Norway show income gaps in Norway are far bigger than what official income statistics have so far shown. Earlier figures have shown the richest one percent earning nine percent of all income in Norway, but the real figure now turns out to be around 20 percent.

Fewer get more

"Income inequality in Norway is far higher than we had thought previously, and the proportion of income that flows to the very richest is much bigger than what we believed before. The tax which top earners pay on their income is also smaller than we thought," said Senior Research Fellow at Statistics Norway Rolf Aaberge in the Rett På podcast.



*Rolf Aaberge, Senior Research Fellow at Statistics Norway.
Photo: Studio Vest AS*

Together with colleagues Jørgen Heibø Modalsli and Ola Lotherington Vestad he analysed how much income Norway's richest citizens actually have by including money earned thorough company and capital gains on top of income which is reported in personal tax returns.

"The last major crisis before Corona was the financial crisis when the top one percent's share of the total income fell dramatically, making Norway's income inequality much smaller. But since 2008, this share has again risen steadily, and now the one percent take home around 20 percent of the total income in Norway," said Aaberge.

This means that in a room with 100 people, one of them will take home one-fifth of all the income due to everyone.

"If we look at net worth, which says something about your potential to earn an income, the one percent actually own between 25 and 30 percent. These two things together does show that economic power is very concentrated in Norway," said Aaberge.

"Breaking out of the social contract"

The reactions from Norway's political left came quickly in the wake of the new figures from Statistics Norway.

In an interview with Dagbladet, Kari Elisabeth Kaski compared today's situation with differences that existed in Norwegian society towards the end of the 1800s. Kaski is a member of the parliamentary finance committee for the Socialist Left Party.

"It is unequal and unfair. Rich people have the opportunity to influence the system in ways that others can't. This is bad for our entire social model. The richest to not pay taxes relative to their income, but break out of the community and the social contract," she said.

The Labour Party's finance spokesperson Hadia Tajik said the numbers showed it was getting increasingly easy to earn money by having money than by going to work.

Aleksander Stokkebø, a member of the parliamentary finance committee for the Conservative Party, defended the income distribution on NRK radio by pointing out that the richest 10 percent pay around 40 percent of all taxes in Norway.

"The fight against inequality is an important one, and what we need to do in that respect is getting more people into working life and make it a priority to help lift up those who have the least in society," said Stokkebø.

Paying less tax

Norway's richest one percent pay on average 22 percent in tax. Statistics Norway now defines the Norwegian tax system regressive for that group. The absolutely richest – the 0.1 percent – pay only between 9 and 17 percent tax.

Many in Norway have believed that the tax system is progressive, but this is not the case for the billionaires, according to Aaberge.

"It is very much regressive when you get to the very top. For the one percent, the tax percentage falls considerably."

A record number of krone-billionaires

One the same day as Statitics Norway published their income figures, the economic magazine Kapital published their annual list of Norway's top 400 richest people. The number of people worth more than one billion kroner (€90.250m) increased by 21 to 362. In order to make the list at all, you now have to be worth at least 850 million kroner (€76.7m).

The corona crisis has been very costly to some of the people high up on that list. Cruiseship billionaire Torstein Hagen has lost 40 billion kroner, but still only falls from second to tenth place. Hotel magnate Petter Stordalen has lost 10 billion kroner, while others have made money from the crisis – notably Norway's "food retail barons" who own the major supermarket chains.

Kapital

Kjølge

Logg inn

KapTab

Reportstørrelse

Inside


Investor

Kommune

Portrett

Tech

1



John Fredriksen

104,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

75

Shipping

2



Odd Reitan

44,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

69

Handel

3



Johan Johannessen

44,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

53

Handel

4



Ole Andreas Halvorsen

43,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

59

Finans

5



Johan H. Andreassen

38,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

99

Finans

6



Gustav Wittne

33,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

67

Spillet

7



Stein Erik Hagen

30,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

64

Industri

8



Ivar Erik Tollefsen

28,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

59

Sammenheng

9



Kjell Inge Røkke

27,00 mrd


+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

62

Olje og energi

10



Torstein Hagen

20,00 mrd

+10,00 mrd

0 mrd

77

Handel/Retail

Kapital's annual list of Norway's 400 richest has 21 more krone-billionaires this year compared to 2019. To make the list you have to be worth at least 850 million kroner.

In total, 260 of the richest 400 have grown richer since last year, 89 have gone down and 51 are at status quo, according to Kapital.

Critics will say that all this goes against the type of society which Nordic countries want to maintain. Creating a more equal society has been a central part of most Norwegian post-war governments. Before WW2, income gaps were big, but they shrunk a lot until the early 1980s.

"Since then, that gap has steadily widened, especially in the past 20 years. This is mainly because people at the very top have seen their earnings increase so much more compared to what most people have experienced," said Aaberge.

Widening gap across the Nordics

Differences are increasing in other Nordic countries too. According to Forbes, the number of dollar billionaires in Finland grew from one to six between 2010 and 2017.

The Nordic Council of Ministers' 2018 Nordic Economic Policy Review also shows how the rich are getting richer and the poor poorer. The report reaches a similar conclusion to that behind the new figures from Statistics Norway:

"The share of total national incomes that goes to those with the highest incomes, have also increased in the Nordic countries. This is because capital incomes, which make up an increasing proportion of total incomes, are more unevenly distributed than other types of income."