

Portrait

Margrethe Vestager dares take the fight to the giants

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Nordic youths want to learn more about work environments

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The many languages of working life

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The Intensive Year: 12 months to find jobs for Swedish immigrants

May 28, 2021

Theme: The role of language in working life



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The many languages of working life

In this edition, we look at work from several different points of view. But in reality, it all comes down to the same thing. Work gives us an identity and experiences we would not have otherwise. That is why we are vulnerable when our professional roles are under attack. Or if we never get the chance to work.

EDITORIAL

28.05.2021

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

The Nordic Council of Ministers' Work Environment Committee has launched an initiative to make work environment knowledge part of the secondary school curriculum. There is great interest in this among vocational students. They have already learned a great deal about ergonomics, lifting techniques and sitting positions. The subject is more remote for those who prepare for university.

By linking education material to the school environment – like the danger of too much passive screen-time – the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise hopes to make the subject relevant for students. As one female student says: “You are still, like, young, so you don’t want to ruin your body already.”

Mehmet from Turkey has been teaching science to young people for 24 years. Now he and his wife are political refugees in Sweden and have been given the chance to participate in the Intensive Year. This is a new initiative aimed at linking internships with language training, giving participants a relevant job within one year.

The Swedish language is key for the duration of the Intensive Year. But English training can be relevant too. A published and experienced researcher with no English skills might struggle to find a job in Sweden, where most scientific texts are written in that language.

Most debates about language and work are centred on the need to learn the main spoken language. The challenge for Finnish-speaking Maria Karjalainen from Rovaniemi in the north of Finland was to learn Swedish. A job in Åland through Nordjobb gave her the opportunity to practice her Swedish in everyday life for the first time. It made her feel safe speaking the language, which she had studied in school but still felt uncomfortable using. All this came in handy when she became an exchange student at Stockholm University the year after.

The language issue is different again for people with hearing difficulties. A deaf person often works in places where there are no other deaf people. That means their sign language can get lost. The Norwegian Signo foundation is the country's largest employer of deaf people.

Hege Farnes Hildrum is their Secretary-General. With so many deaf people in the workplace, you get an unusually rich language environment, she points out. After many years of fighting, Norwegian sign language is now recognised as a national language alongside bokmål, nynorsk, the different Sami languages, kvensk and romanes.

It is still too early to conclude what this new status will mean, but it might prepare deaf people better for working life, hopes Hege Farnes Hildrum.

But what happens when communication collapses or when language is used for bullying and harassment? In their new book, Norwegian researchers Bitten Nordrik and Teresa Østbø Kuldova point to a development where workplace conflicts are increasingly described in militaristic terms.

“Nonconformist behaviour in the workplace is increasingly understood as a breach of the law, and investigated using methods inspired by the police,” they write and warn against what is called workplace investigations. External lawyers and psychologists are hired to allow employers to draw a line under workplace grievances. Rather than talking about the reasons behind the conflicts and finding solutions involving all the parties, the accused end up in Kafkaesque interrogations with no legal protection.

We all need someone who dares to take the fight to the big guns. Read Marie Preisler's portrait of EU Commissioner for Competition, Margrethe Vestager, who has fought some of the world's largest companies like Amazon, Facebook and Google.



The Intensive Year: 12 months to find jobs for Swedish immigrants

The Helsingborg employment service got ready as soon as the government announced its decision, and was prepared when the Intensive Year was launched on 15 April this year. One month later, 40 job seekers have been contacted. One of them is Mehmet.

NEWS

28.05.2021

TEXT: FAYME ALM

Mehmet studied science in his home country Turkey and later trained to be a teacher. He arrived in Sweden as a political refugee 18 months ago.

“I was a science teacher for 24 years at a high-status Ankara school and I loved my job. But after both I and my wife spent time in prison because of our political beliefs, we no longer dared to stay in the country,” Mehmet tells the Nordic Labour Journal as we meet on a sunny afternoon at an outdoor café in a fishing village on the Öresund coast.

Mehmet is now participating in the Intensive Year, a government programme run by the Swedish Public Employment Service aimed at newly arrived citizens. The job seekers must already be part of the Establishment Programme, which is being offered to people between 20 and 65 who has recently secured permission to stay as a refugee, in need of protection or dependant.

Detailed conversation

The Helsingborg employment service office is in Söder, a neighbourhood with a high unemployment rate. Elizabeth Meléndez is one of the two caseworkers who work with the

Intensive Year for the regional employment office, which covers 11 municipalities.

“In late March we started identifying people we could invite for a meeting to ask them questions and find out whether they could be candidates for the Intensive Year – as soon as it kicked off,” she tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

The first meeting is mainly to gather information, and there is a lot of it, explains Meléndez. That is why each candidate is always met by two caseworkers.

“Our job is not only to register information but also to collect various points of view. Working as a pair is far more efficient than holding conversations and registrations on your own. It is important not to lose sight of anything.”

More than an unemployed person

If the candidate is motivated and can participate full-time in the Intensive Year, a new meeting is arranged to gather even more information. At a third meeting, the candidate is asked to talk about who they are as a person.

“These are fun and fantastic conversations where the candidate describes themselves and talks about who they are beyond being an unemployed person. Everyone needs to be seen and when we talk about who we are, we grow,” says Elizabeth Meléndez.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, an interpreter is present during all of the meetings.

From dream job to real work

The time schedule must be observed, so the matching between job seeker and employer start as soon as the Intensive Year is approved by both parties. The aim is to find a suitable employer who can offer intensive practical work that lasts for six to nine months.

“We only have 12 months. What can we achieve in that time? What is realistic and what feels good? We respect people’s desire to find their dream job, but it is not always possible and we sometimes need to settle with getting the candidate into the labour market. Preferably in the trade that the candidate has asked for,” says Elizabeth Meléndez.

When matching people with jobs, Elizabeth Meléndez and her colleague use *Matching from day one* –which the national research project *Jämställd etablering* (Gender equal integration) has tested and found efficient. In its first interim report, the project shows that the job seeker’s informal skills, motivation and qualities is likely to be of great value for employers seeking the right kind of person.

Women need more time

There is a majority of women participants in the project both in Helsingborg and nationally. Using the process described above, it is possible to compensate for non-documented for-

mer education and the lack of references from former employers.

Both of the caseworkers in Helsingborg also know that the timetable can be different for women than for men when it comes to making a decision which will have an impact on more people than themselves.

“Women often need more time before making a final decision. There might be cultural reasons like their family responsibilities. But we also see opportunities in growing trades like in logistics. Here you can often find jobs and internships that can be carried out in the early hours, in the evenings and some weekends. These will sometimes be more suitable than an 8 to 5 weekday job,” says Elizabeth Meléndez.

Other sectors offering internships include elderly care and services like cleaning, as well as private schools. Internships with public employers are rarer, partly because of confidentiality issues, explains Elizabeth Meléndez.

Language is a reason, not a barrier

The Swedish language is central throughout the Intensive Year. But English courses can be relevant. As Elisabeth Meléndez says, a published and experienced researcher with no English skills might struggle to get a Job in Sweden where most scientific texts are written in that language.

“We try to focus on what the job seeker can do with the knowledge and skills they have today. Language should not be a barrier, but something that is constantly being developed. That is why we focus so much on language for three months and later based on each person’s need,” says Elisabeth Meléndez.

Mehmet is now studying basic Swedish. He is considering joining a course in occupational Swedish too.

“My Turkish education has been validated and approved by the Swedish Council for Higher Education. My aim is to get a Swedish teaching certificate, so I have signed up for a course for foreign teachers run by Malmö University. I am also applying for internships at various schools in the Helsingborg area. It would be nice if I could combine this with a course in occupational Swedish,” says Mehmet.

Because of his status as a political refugee, we have not used his real name.

Nordic youths want to learn more about work environments

A Nordic project could help young people learn more about work environments, starting in elementary school. The Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise is preparing a module for 13 to 18-year-olds to improve their work environment knowledge, and the hope is to spread this across the Nordics.

NEWS

28.05.2021

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN

Today's youths are facing a changing labour market. A report presented at the World Economic Forum says two-thirds of today's school starters will be working in occupations that do not yet exist. Also in a shorter perspective, most young people will be facing a complicated and knowledge-oriented labour market.

Already we see that it takes longer for students to find permanent work after higher secondary education, which means many end up in short-term, precarious jobs. Anyone who does not know what they are entitled to when it comes to work environments and other rights, run a risk of injury which could otherwise have been avoided.

Nordic cooperation on work environment knowledge

That is why the Nordic Council of Ministers' Working Environment Committee has initiated a pilot study run by the Swedish Agency for Work Environment Expertise. They will propose how to develop work environment knowledge for secondary school pupils, and then how to spread this across the Nordic region.

The Agency has established a project group which includes teachers, study and career advisors and researchers. They in turn report to a steering group made up of representatives for all of the Nordic countries. Soon the steering group will receive the first proposal for how work environment knowledge can be spread to pupils aged 13 to 16. If this is accepted, a work environment curriculum for this age group will be presented towards the end of the year.



All the Nordic countries believe it is important for young people to learn more about work environments, says Robert Ljung, an analyst at the Agency for Work Environment Expertise. Some of the material can cover what work environments are, but it can also cover the labour market more generally. Everyday concerns are important. What is the impact on your health from sitting still, and how many screen hours are safe?

“One way of getting close to the student's current reality is to use their school work environment as an example. We al-

so aim to present the material we are developing in shorter sections which will remain interesting, informative and fun. They can be presented as films, plays or audio files. It should also be easy to translate the material into all the Nordic languages,” says Robert Ljung.

The working group believes it will be easier to get schools interested in the material by thinking in shorter education modules.

“Long processes are needed to get major changes into schools. Our material is meant to be no longer than two hours in total, divided into 20-minute sections. This makes it easier to put in a section wherever and whenever it suits,” says Robert Ljung,

“Preparing for the future, like”

Maria Guldbrandsson is one of the members of the Agency for Work Environment Expertise working group. She has been a secondary school teacher since 2008 and now works at the Thorén Framtid Kunnskapsakademien (the Knowledge Academy) at Alnön near Sundsvall.



Maria Guldbrandsson has investigated what upper secondary school students know about work environments. Photo: Fredrik Guldbrandsson

She graduated from the Mid Sweden University in January, and when she was about to write her essay on working life, health and rehabilitation she turned to the Agency for tips on a suitable topic in work environment research, which ended up being how work environment knowledge is being taught in elementary and upper secondary schools.

Maria Guldbrandsson chose to find out what upper secondary school students know about work environments, what work experience they have and what they think about the work environments of the future. She divided the student into four focus groups and interviewed them.

Two of the groups were made up of students preparing for university and two had students aiming for vocational training in trade and administration. In the groups with vocational students, around half had foreign backgrounds. The results will be presented in the essay “Preparing for the future, like”.

Having the energy for a working life

One of the conclusions is that there is a big difference in the knowledge about work environments between vocational students and those preparing for university.

“I was impressed by the students on the vocational programmes. They knew a lot, had experience from various workplaces and had reflected on what they had experienced. They know more about work environments and feel prepared for the labour market in a completely different way than those who are preparing for a university education.

“With being prepared comes a feeling of self-confidence, security and being able to manage on your own,” says Maria Guldbrandsson.

Those preparing for university, however, know very little about work environments. If they have thought about it at all, it is in relation to a summer job. Work environment knowledge does not form part of their education and is also not an aim in the curriculum.

“So it is not the teachers’ fault for not talking about work environments to students preparing for university. But these students also would like to know more. They can definitely count on more support from home, but they can also feel it is a bit ‘embarrassing’ to ask mummy for advice their whole life,” says Maria Guldbrandsson.

More motivating

With the vocational programmes, it is a different story. Knowledge about work environments is partly an aim of the programme. And even if these vary, practical learning in workplaces often gives students a good idea of what a work environment is, as well as a greater understanding of its importance.

This could include knowledge about things like ergonomics and lifting techniques. A female participant says ‘You are still, like, young, so you don’t want to ruin your body already’.

The students who Maria Guldbrandsson interviewed often expressed their worries about the psychosocial work environment, and some feared they would not have the energy to go through an entire working life.

“The students want to have the energy to work their whole lives. Those who are born abroad are keen to say that they want to be self-sufficient and not rely on benefits. Many have seen the risks involved in some work environments and do not want to become a burden on Swedish society. Several also face a greater pressure, because they know they might be expelled if they fail to get a job.”

Maria Guldbrandsson's conclusion is that the students are interested in work environment issues and that they want to learn more both theoretically and practically. Students doing

vocational training are not worried about their future jobs, but all the students in the survey want more information about their rights, discrimination and health.

They also want more support in the workplace. Or as one student said: "I guess it's good to know what kind of rights you have and that... how things should be, so that you don't go to a super-bad workplace and think this is how it should be. Because many people don't know any better, like."



Improved labour market access for sign language users

Earlier this year the Norwegian parliament passed a new language act that states that Norway is multilingual. For the first time, Norwegian sign language was recognised as the national sign language, equal to spoken and written Norwegian as a language and cultural expression.

THEME

28.05.2021

TEXT: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN, PHOTO: JON HAUGE, SCANPIX

“I also wish to congratulate Norwegian sign language users. Although linguists have known for a while that Norwegian sign language is a language in its own right, and not a special teaching tool, today it is official. The language act says Norwegian sign language is equal to Norwegian both as a cultural expression and as a language system,” said Minister for Culture Amid Q Raja as parliament debated the new legislation.

But only time will tell what the real, additional benefits will be for sign language users, say experts at the Signo diaconal foundation.

Hanna Cederström is an advisor at Signo, which organises labour market measures for deaf people and people with reduced hearing. She believes the legislation will make public schemes more accessible for deaf people. It will also make

things better for foreign-language immigrants who are learning the Norwegian sign language.



“Many think sign language is an international language, but in fact, it isn’t. Each country has its own sign language. Sign language has its own grammar. That is why many immigrants struggle to learn Norwegian sign language. When we work with deaf people who speak a foreign language, we can adapt our language to their needs since it is so visual,” explains Cederström.

“Since we as advisors are deaf ourselves, we know how to adapt communication for people who speak a different language. Our job is to find out what works rather than what doesn’t.”

Several foreign language speakers who have come to Norway had worked for many years in the construction industry in their home countries. Some do not manage to learn Norwegian, but they can still do a good job.

Free for the employer

“In Norway, employers can use sign language interpreters free of charge, while other Nordic countries have other solutions. It is important to us in Norway to maintain this right. The new language act which makes sign language equal can help strengthen the right to free interpretation,” believes Cederström.

According to Signo, they are Norway’s largest employer of deaf people. Hege Farnes Hildrum is the Secretary-General and explains that having so many deaf employees creates an unusually good language environment.

“Even if the law does not directly strengthen the right for individuals, it might happen indirectly as the authorities have been given greater responsibility. We might see better access to interpreters, education and sign language teaching. All in all, this might better prepare people with deafness for the labour market. That is why we are very optimistic about what the new act will mean,” says Hildrum.



The foundation that she leads is not-for-profit and diaconal and its mission statement is to offer services to deaf people. It also offers services for people with reduced hearing and deaf-blind people, and it all is based on Norwegian sign language.

Great recognition

What the new act will mean in practice is not yet certain, but it is very important that sign language is now recognised as an official language, she continues.

“The authorities must take responsibility to protect and promote the Norwegian sign language on an equal footing with ordinary Norwegian. That’s what is new in this act. Sign language is now equal with Norwegian as a linguistic and cultural expression.”

For deaf people in Norway, this recognition is very important. Their language has the same status as other Norwegian languages.

Without meaning?

The new legislation was issued for consultation, and Hildrum says many asked for something a bit more concrete.

“Because what does it really mean that public bodies must protect and promote sign language? We will be watching what the future brings.”

Hildrum argues that the legislation is important because it protects the kinds of services Signo can offer.

The challenge of two dimensions

Corona has also had an impact on sign languages because the language looks different on a screen.

“Sign language becomes two-dimensional on a screen, while when people meet it is three-dimensional. Those who want to learn sign language get much better training when meeting in person rather than on a screen. But beyond that, deaf people are actually really good at communicating on a screen,” she says enthusiastically. Many deaf people use video calls.

A “new” tool

Cederström tells us about another relatively new type of technology. Cochleaimplantat (CI) is a device which consists of

an electrode that is implanted in the cochlea and an external device that is connected to the electrode. The external device works as a kind of hearing aid that catches sound and sends it on to the cochlea. From there, the signals are sent to the brain where they are interpreted.

“CI is a fantastic aid, but it is important to remember that it is only an aid. More and more children with CIs are well integrated into schools, but not all get good sign language training. Things usually go very well for the first few years, but after a while, things start to get lost. This could turn into a problem later when the students start further secondary education for instance. They then realise they need better sign language skills,” says Cederström.

“Employers are often very sceptical, but many are very positively surprised when they get to know deaf employees,” she says.

Better numbers are needed

The employment rate among deaf people in Norway is lower than for the rest of the population, believe the experts at Signo.

“But we have no firm numbers. All we have is a Danish survey from 12 years ago. We no longer use this,” says Hildrum, who used to work for NAV, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration. She knows that solid statistics are always needed to properly deal with a challenge.

“But then you need to know that this is a challenge. Historically we know that many deaf people end up on disability benefits. But over the years more and more young people have got an education and have completely different opportunities in the labour market.”

Cederström confirms that many deaf people have traditionally had practical occupations because they did not manage to follow the teacher in school.

“Many have been deaf on their own and have not got much out of their education. They have ended up in practical occupations. Today, many deaf people get a higher education because they have had access to interpreters and other aids that they need. We are on the right path. The new language act will definitely strengthen sign language.”



Nordic job exchange hopes to bounce back from Corona

Many Nordic cooperation platforms have been hit by the Corona pandemic. One of the higher profile ones is Nordjobb, the Nordic mobility programme for young workers. Summer jobs should be starting up now, but many are still waiting to hear from their prospective employers.

THEME

28.05.2021

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING

In addition to offering jobs to tens of thousands of young people, Nordjobb has also become a breeding ground for those who want to work with Nordic matters later in life. Nordjobb workers also learn how to communicate in other languages than English.

Jobs in the shadow of the pandemic

Nordjobb is expected to link more people to jobs this year compared to 2020, but not as many as in previous years. The Corona pandemic has disturbed the entire Nordjobb project. Many employers do not want foreign workers now. Many workers dare not travel, particularly to Sweden, because their fear the pandemic.

Last year Nordjobb diverged from their principle and found some jobs in people's home countries too, in order to avoid cross-border travel. This year it might happen again.

But there are more Nordic jobs this year, all advertised on Nordjobb's website.

If the pandemic abates, many young people could find jobs in the Swedish healthcare sector, in Finnish elderly care or in Greenland's fish processing plants.

Tourist businesses in Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Bornholm and in Åland are looking for summer workers. In Norway, you can get a job as a car mechanic or chauffeur.



A worker who got a summer job through Nordjobb at a petrol station in the Faroe Islands. Photo: Dagmar Malena Winther.

Several countries are already allowing Nordjobb-workers in, including Sweden, Greenland, the Faroes and Denmark. In some countries, however, workers must undergo quarantine. Norway will probably not allow anyone in until after this summer unless something changes.

Nordjobb has advertised jobs during May, but towards the end of that month much remains uncertain. Everything depends on when infection rates fall and vaccinations increase.

What was perceived to be a safe region to work in one month ago might have seen a sudden re-emergence of Covid-19 leading to quarantines and new restrictions.

Nordjobb cannot cover the cost of testing and quarantine for everyone who might need it. Many jobs are in the care sector where it is particularly important to avoid infections.

More than a job

Young people who only want a summer job can apply directly or go via the public employment office. Although the job in itself is important to those who apply, Nordjobb is about more than that. The whole Nordic package is central to the experience.

Getting the chance to learn about the place where you work is important too, as is meeting and getting to know Nordjobb-workers from other Nordic countries.

The organisers find jobs in the Nordics, tell the applicants about them and arrange accommodation and a recreational programme.

You need adequate basic knowledge and comprehension of a Scandinavian language, but there is no need to have any previous experience in Nordic activities. But many go on to work in a Nordic setting afterwards, and Nordjobb has become a good recruitment channel for the youth wing of the Federation of the Norden Association.



Bo Nylander outside the Nordjobb offices in Copenhagen. Photo: Emma Maria Dreist.

Swedish Bo Nylander is head of programme for Nordjobb at the main secretariat in Copenhagen. His first job through Nordjobb was at a fish processing plant in Skagen, Denmark. Now he works for the small Nordjobb secretariat which has local administrations in each Nordic country. Many seek jobs in the western Nordics, i.e. the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Iceland, looking for adventure and a unique experience, explains Nylander. He has worked in the Faroes himself several times.

Highest interest in Sweden and Finland

The number of Nordjobb applicants is often linked to the situation at home. Sweden and Finland have the highest youth unemployment levels in the Nordic region and the highest number of Nordjobb applicants. In a normal year, like in 2019, each of those countries had more than 1,500 applicants. This year the number could be considerably lower.

Denmark came third with just over 600 applicants a few years ago. Many still want to work in Norway because they know about that country's high pay. Norwegian youths, meanwhile, are not so keen to seek work abroad. In 2019, 280 Norwegian youths wanted to work in a different Nordic country via Nordjobb.

Iceland is the smallest Nordic country, but it has a high number of Nordjobb applicants per capita. After the financial crisis, the number was high but has since fallen to around 200.

Nordjobb believes the Corona crisis could lead to higher youth unemployment, which would once more make the organisation attractive to young people.

Nordjobb arranges work for young people a bit like a temping agency, explains Bo Nylander. Employers put in an order, which is uploaded to Nordjobb's website. Those who are interested have signed up to a database which can match applicants to jobs.

Nordjobb is quite unique, according to Bo Nylander. One pilot used to offer jobs in Estonia, and there is also an EU project that matches jobs across Europe.

There is also a regional project called “Nordisk jobblösning” which operates across most of Denmark, in southern Norway and southern Sweden. This is financed by the EU via the European Eures employment network.

This project has no age limit and also arranges full-time work. In the future we might see new projects addressing groups of people who are a bit further away from the labour market, covering the whole of the Nordic region perhaps.

We now also have more knowledge about the differences in the Nordic labour markets, says Bo Nylander. He mentions the Danish surplus of physiotherapists. This could be easily solved, since there is a lack of physiotherapists in Sweden despite that country having more unemployment overall. There is a mismatch in the Nordic labour market which Nordjobb could help solve.

Mostly progress

Nordjobb has not faced many problems since it started in 1985, according to Bo Nylander. Right now they are working to improve the application process, which is perceived to be a bit old-fashioned.

“We realise we have been lagging behind when it comes to technology. We have to work with very old-fashioned systems, and see that more and more young people struggle to fill in our forms,” admits Nylander. Applicants have to go through more than ten pages of questions. But the system is being swapped for a new one, and this autumn things will be easier, he promises.

Scandinavian language a must, including in Finland

Finnish job seekers face a special problem because the application must be done in Swedish. This can be a real obstacle for young Finnish-speaking applicants.

Yet all Finnish children learn Swedish in school. The application model is like their first test of how to communicate in a workplace in Sweden, where most Finns look for work. New this year, though, is that Finnish and Icelandic applicants can apply for a job in English.



One of Nordjobb’s main goals is to increase knowledge of and interest in the Nordic languages, explains Lena Höglund, Secretary-General of the Youth League of the Finnish Norden Association.

Finland has long had the highest number of job seekers, but there is a downward trend. This could be due to deteriorating language skills.

Other reasons could be shorter periods in university and stricter regulations on student loans. This means young people might not be able to choose a Nordjobb adventure or other periods abroad. They are pushed into working at home in Finland where youth unemployment has fallen, notes Lena Höglund.

Nordic benefits from Nordjobb

Nordjobb is not a summer job project for students only, but they do make up the majority of applicants. The project is equally important for those with vocational educations who are looking for internships or who want to find a new job.

The summer job has probably helped some people find permanent work with the same employer. In any case, the organisers believe the experience will be a life-long memory and that it will benefit people’s future working life.

The Corona crisis has led to a necessary step towards the digital world, points out Lena Höglund. But the main point with Nordjobb is to travel to another Nordic country to meet other young workers and that they communicated face-to-face.

Remote work does not sit so well with Nordjobb’s principles. Most of the workplaces are also very hands-on, which means people have to be physically present.

The future looks bright, as the tourism and care sectors will always be there and might even grow. The agriculture and gardening sectors also need seasonal labour, and Nordjobb helps when there is a shortage.

An underfunded project

Lena Höglund is unhappy that the Nordic Council of Ministers decided to cut Nordjobb’s budget at a time when it could be argued that the organisation needs more funding. She believes things are moving in the wrong direction.

The cut is not due to the Corona pandemic or a result of any failure on Nordjobb’s part, she points out. It is a result of the prime ministers’ vision for 2030 which prioritises sustainability, climate issues and digital integration. Cultural activities have seen their budgets cut.

Bo Nylander in Copenhagen also thinks that Nordjobb is underfunded. The budget is the same as in the early 1990s, and now it is being cut with half a million Danish kroner (€67,000).

Lena Höglund hopes the money will return once borders re-open and the Nordics get back to normal. Yet the cuts do seem to be permanent, according to Bo Nylander. This means Nordjobb's support from the Council of Ministers for next year is €390,000.



Åland gave Finnish Maria a Nordic language boost

Improved self-confidence, great experiences together with other Nordjobb workers and useful language training. These are the best memories from Maria Karjalainen's time working through Nordjobb. Her job was in Åland – exotic enough for a student from Rovaniemi in northern Finland.

THEME

28.05.2021

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: PRIVATE

Many of the over 30,000 Nordic youths who have found work through Nordjobb since the start back in 1985 have had similar experiences.

Finding a summer job away from unemployment at home can be important, and so is finding an internship after graduating – or your first proper salary. But many also talk nostalgically about great Nordic experiences which they would have missed without Nordjobb.

Maria Karjalainen recalls the unique midsummer celebrations in Åland. Others have been on whale safaris in Green-

land or experienced the *allsång* singing event in Skansen in Stockholm. The memories remain, says Karjalainen.



Midsummer night in Åland.

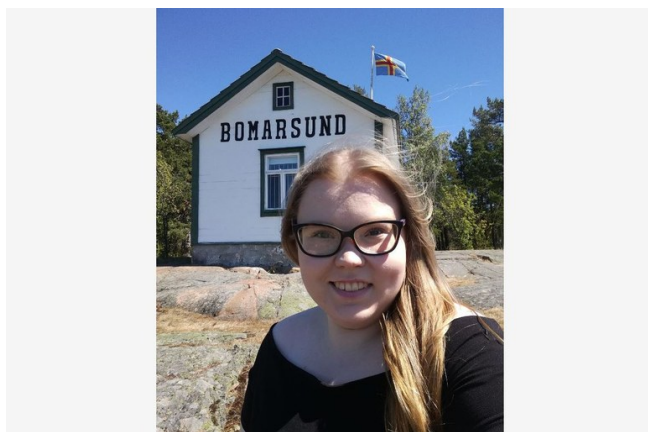
In the summer of 2018, Maria Karjalainen could not find a summer job in her home city of Rovaniemi, nor in the student city of Oulu. She had heard about Nordjobb before, but during a time when the bar for her was too high, as it is for many Finnish-speaking youths.

In 2018, Maria had begun studying at the University of Oulu. She applied through Nordjobb and got a summer job as a waitress at a restaurant near Mariehamn in Åland. She had no work experience from the trade, but wanted to challenge herself and go outside of her comfort zone, she explains.

Swedish is the only official language in Åland, although it is part of Finland. Many tourists visit Åland in the summer. Most come from Sweden, but some Finns travel there too. This means there are many openings for season workers in the tourism industry. Many of Nordjobb's positions are in tourism.

Cultural differences in Swedish

For the first time in her life, Maria Karjalainen got to practice her Swedish in real life at work in Åland. This gave her confidence in a language she had studied at school but had still felt uncomfortable with.



Maria Karjalainen in front of the Bomarsund museum in Prästö. Bomarsund is the ruins from a Russian fortress

which stood between 1832 and 1854, when it was blown up by the British and French after a battle there.

She also knew that she would need the Swedish language later on. The year after, she was due to be an exchange student at Stockholm University.

The cultural differences between Åland and northern Finland were not as big as they would have been if she had been working in Denmark or Norway, she realised. But there were some differences still. Åland's marine environment was very different to her home city in Finnish Lapland. She saw how the small Åland society worked as a team. The dominance of the Swedish language in Åland and the importance of the Swedish media became clear to her.

Personal development and an interest in the Nordics

The actual summer job might not be the most important thing for those who find work through Nordjobb. Maria Karjalainen talks more about new experiences and gaining confidence in speaking several languages.

Her progress strengthened her self-confidence and gave her a feeling of being able to succeed at more things. For her, the expectations she had had to Nordjobb were fulfilled.

Maria Karjalainen also fulfils Nordjobb's aim to increase people's interest in the Nordic cooperation between workers later in life. Today, she is active in the youth wing of the Federation of the Norden Association, both in Oulu and on a national level in Finland.

Nordic work experiences are useful for all, says Maria Karjalainen. It allows people to learn new things, develop new language skills and gain new perspectives.

No need to go far

"There are differences within the Nordic region for sure, but it is easy to move around and adapt to your neighbouring Nordic countries. Nordjobb offers a great opportunity for young people in the Nordics, and it ought to get more attention," says Maria Karjalainen.

She also sees it as a secure summer job in more than one sense. Accommodation, practical help and togetherness is also part of the package.

Many in Finland believe Swedish is such a small language that it is not needed, and that schools should focus on the big, global languages like English.

Maria Karjalainen disagrees. Nordic work experience is also equally valuable as any work experience from further afield in the world. A new environment always brings new and useful experiences, she says.

English is now the most important foreign language in Finland. But knowing some Swedish or Scandinavian brings

added value. Via languages you get deeper into the culture, where language plays an important part, says Maria Karjalainen.

Speaking the language of the country where you work improves your chances of creating contacts and the skills are appreciated by people you meet. Also, many Nordic companies are operating in Finland. That means Nordic language skills are valuable in the Finnish labour market too.

“Thanks to the Nordjobb summer, I later got a dream job in Finland because I had the necessary Swedish language experiences,” says Maria Karjalainen.

That summer job also provided her with more opportunities. At least I see Swedish as an important factor for future progress, she adds.



Margrethe Vestager dares take the fight to the giants

EU's Danish Commissioner for Competition Margrethe Vestager fights against the big ones bullying the little ones. It brings her respect at home and abroad.

PORTRAIT

28.05.2021

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER PREISLER, PHOTO: JENNIFER JACQUEMART/EU

When Margrethe Vestager served as Denmark's Minister of the Economy and the Interior, unemployed Danish construction workers gave her the middle finger – literally, in plaster – as a “thank you” for her and the government's decision to cut their unemployment benefits.

Today she is the darling of the trade unions as a result of her work as the EU Commissioner for Competition, where she fights against big companies and tech giants undermining Danish and Nordic core values; the welfare state and a balanced labour market.

It is a remarkable turnaround, believes Henrik Kjerrumgaard, owner of consultancy firm White Cloud and a former advisor to Margrethe Vestager. He also used to run campaigns for the Danish Social Liberal Party. Before her EU career, Vestager was the party's youngest ever leader.



Henrik Kjerrumgaard is a former special advisor to Margrethe Vestager. He was also campaign leader for the Danish Social Liberal Party.

“The left of Danish politics and the trade unions have radically changed their view of Margrethe Vestager after she became an EU Commissioner. There is now real enthusiasm for her as a defender of welfare and jobs, but her ideological platform remains unchanged – to fight the unjust abuse of power,” says Henrik Kjerrumgaard.

A new view of the EU

He points to four things Commissioner Margrethe Vestager has done that have been particularly important to labour markets and welfare in Europe. Perhaps the best known is the many cases the EU, led on by the Danish Commissioner for Competition, has been bringing against multinational companies and their failure to pay taxes.

Several of these cases were already in the EU system before Margrethe Vestager started in her job as Commissioner, but none of her predecessors had chosen to take action. Perhaps they worried about the consequences, muses Henrik Kjerrumgaard. The Danish Commissioner dared to take action.

“Meanwhile, she has also influenced the actual conversation about the tech giants – which have used to enjoy iconic status – to the extent that even in the USA there is now a debate about the necessity for some sort of regulation of technology businesses to stop things developing beyond control.”

The Danish Commissioner is also trying to prevent the platform economy from creating a proletariat of workers with no rights. Henrik Kjerrumgaard also believes it is thanks to Margrethe Vestager that the EU now has a better reputation among the Danish public.

“The EU has typically been seen as a large bureaucracy, but when Margrethe Vestager as Commissioner for Competition takes on some of the largest companies in the world people see that the EU is also a body that can make decisions.”

He believes that Vestager now enjoys more or less undivided support at home. She was reappointed as Commissioner by Denmark’s Social Democratic government despite the tradition of governments giving commissioner roles to someone from their own party.

Tax lady and verbal beatings

She is also a well-known and respected profile on the international stage, although more well-known than respected among certain state leaders. Former US President Donald Trump called her Europe’s “tax lady” and “perhaps worse than any person I’ve ever met”.



Margrethe Vestager is safe in her chair at her office at Berleymont in Bruxelles. She was re-elected in 2019. Photo: Xavier Lejeune.

Yet Margrethe Vestager has stood tall in the face of verbal beatings from political opponents throughout her political career. She thanked the construction workers for the extended middle finger in plaster by meeting them in person a few days later. She called their “present” “an example of our democratic rights and opportunities, but also a reminder that our rights only survive if we make use of them. So let us debate and discuss.”

Margrethe Vestager’s career has been characterised by her willingness to push through difficult decisions, something which has only been possible because she is brave, has integrity, shows leadership and a measure of determination, said Svend Thorhauge, leader for the Social Liberal Party in his speech at Margrethe Vestager’s 50th birthday.

He also mentioned her energy and debating talent:

“One really has to get up early to have a chance to keep up with you. Your work capacity is phenomenal. And you are able to explain the most complicated of issues.”

Others have accused her of carrying a certain amount of arrogance and brutality behind an apparently open and friendly attitude.

Working around the clock

At the start of her career, some of the public clashes hurt, says Henrik Kjerrumgaard, who was her special advisor between 2011 and 2014. During this period, she was responsible for securing political agreement on major policy reforms – including a halving of the time people could claim unemployment benefits and longer working hours for teachers.

Both these reforms were met with tough criticism. What was most uncomfortable for Margrethe Vestager was that her children were also confronted with this in school, remembers Henrik Kjerrumgaard. He says she can be personal in media interviews without becoming private, and she never accepts interviews in her own home.

Margrethe Vestager's husband lives in Denmark, and Henrik Kjerrumgaard therefore thinks she will return at the end of her term at the EU Commission. But she will probably not go back to Danish politics. Her brand, international results and drive are all too big for that, believes Henrik Kjerrumgaard.

"We will see her in prominent international positions for many years to come. Her skills will be needed in the face of the many changes the world is facing, and she can work around the clock. When the rest of us on team Margrethe were exhausted, she was always ready to carry on – and if there was no more work to be done she set about baking buns."

A self-declared feminist

Margrethe Vestager is also a knitter and a self-declared feminist. She told Femina magazine that we are moving towards gender equality in the workplace "at a completely unacceptably slow speed".

In that same interview she said this about leadership and boardroom gender quotas:

"If you had asked me 15 years ago I would have said 'QUOTAS? No, that is for fish'. But I have come to realise that we have had an informal male quota of around 95% for a few hundred years now. And that has worked really well. For the men. This points to the fact that quotas do, of course, work. So I think they should just accept the offer of balance and say 'super' if it is to be fair at all. If not we will have 70% men in powerful positions for the next 100 years."

Workplace battlegrounds: Are Norwegian employees being criminalised?

How should an employer handle workplace conflicts? In Norway, it is becoming increasingly common to hire external consultants to perform a “faktaundersøkelse” – or workplace investigation. The consultants often come from a legal or psychological background. Employees risk being exposed to situations resembling police interrogations – yet with no legal protection, warn researchers Bitten Nordrik and Tereza Østbø Kuldova.

NEWS

28.05.2021

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL LINDAHL

The two OsloMet researchers work at the AFI Work Research Institute. They investigated this phenomenon and have published ‘Faktaundersøkelser – a “hybrid conflict weapon” in Norwegian workplaces’. The book is based on 33 interviews covering 22 different cases where workplace investigations have been used.

“The problem lies in the method itself, not that it is being applied wrongly. It is no coincidence that the method limits freedom of speech in the workplace, deteriorates the psychosocial work environment and undermines the social partners’ cooperation,” says Bitten Nordrik.

The two researchers call workplace investigations a “hybrid weapon”.

“Hybrid means the mixing of two or more elements to create something new with completely new properties. In war, the term is used when both military and non-military weapons are used together to consciously challenge and confuse the enemy,” says Tereza Østbø Kuldova.



Bitten Nordrik and Tereza Østbø Kuldova have written the book about workplace investigations.

This might sound dramatic, but conflicts between employees in a workplace or between an employee and a manager can often become very serious and difficult to solve. Sometimes they end up in the courts, but this happens far too rarely for there to be proper precedence about workplace investigations.

Workplace investigations were first developed in Norway in 2005 - 2007 when the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority launched an anti-bullying campaign called “Working without bullying”. In the wake of this grew a trend of zero-tolerance for workplace bullying and harassment.

The term is rooted in a strategy to fight crime which the New York Police Department called “broken windows”. By focusing on minor crimes like broken windows, shoplifting and graffiti, crime could be nipped in the bud.

“Workplace conflicts are increasingly being talked about using war metaphors. ‘Workplace deviance’, ‘contra-productive work behaviour’ or nonconformist behaviour in the workplace is increasingly understood as a breach of the law – and treated as such. It is then investigated using methods inspired by the police,” write the authors in the book’s preface.

In Sweden, workplace investigations are known as *mobbing-sutredningar*, or bullying investigations, but the Norwegian term is broader and can include disloyalty to the employer for instance. To complicate things further, legal protection now exists for whistle-blowers who can report on wrong or illegal action in the workplace anonymously.

“There is a big difference between anonymity and confidentiality,” points out lawyer Birthe M Eriksen, who has represented several whistleblowers and employees who felt harassed.

“In the case of confidentiality, the employer knows who has spoken up but promises to keep it a secret. But if this is done anonymously, nobody knows who has been sounding the alarm.”

The interviews performed by Bitten Nordrik and Tereza Østbø Kuldova show that there has been considerable confusion about what a workplace investigation entails. Several respondents felt pressured to take part when they themselves thought the issues should have been solved through ordinary workplace channels.

“They were told the method was similar to known work environment processes, but then experienced that it was anything but.”

Although the person who has raised concern, or who has had a grievance made against them, has the right to being supported by a union or a safety representative, this representative has no right to interfere or comment during the interrogation.

“It makes people feel like they are in a hostage situation where they are not quite sure what to do,” says Bitten Nordrik.

The lack of information makes employees vulnerable when interrogated and treated like suspects.

“A majority of the people we interviewed developed serious psychological issues like angst, depression and post-traumatic stress. The experiences also triggered suicidal thoughts in some,” say Bitten Nordrik and Tereza Østbø Kuldova.

Workplace investigations are carried out in two phases. First comes a preliminary investigation to establish whether there really are claims of harassment or bullying or other issues linked to the psychosocial work environment. The second phase looks at whether work environment legislation has been broken.

“Workplace investigations are the employer’s way of ‘drawing a line under’ a complaint or an alert from a whistleblower. Those who offer the method often present it as an alternative to a possible court case,” say the two researchers.

Workplace investigations have gradually become so common that they now represent a considerable source of income for psychologist and lawyers.

“But which ethical guidelines should be followed by those who carry out workplace investigations? The literature underlines that the investigators should step out of their professional roles – be it lawyer, doctor or psychologist – and en-

ter into the constructive role as fact investigator, a role which does not come under the same professional or ethical guidelines,” points out Bitten Nordrik.

Birthe M Eriksen, who contributed to one chapter in the book, is also critical.

“The border between workplace investigations and private preliminary investigations is fuzzy. Sometimes I wonder whether a workplace investigation is chosen in order to avoid having to relate to the bar association’s guidelines,” she says.

Both the psychological association and the bar associations were asked to comment on these mixed roles.

“Only the bar association answered our request, by underlining that a lawyer will always be a lawyer and will be judged from that,” says Bitten Nordrik.

Only recently did the bar association decide that a lawyer must always follow the professional regulations.

What is it then that the authors feel make workplace investigations so destructive?

- The causes of conflict are not included in the investigation. Rather than looking at the problems as part of the work environment, they are linked to individual people.
- Workplace investigations are based on the employer’s mandate. There is nobody to complain to if you disagree with the result.
- The interviews are not voluntary. Employees are told they must participate because according to the work environment act they must participate and have a duty to approach the employer and the safety representative as soon as they learn about harassment in the workplace.
- Those who have been interrogated are put under pressure to sign the minutes taken by the investigators during the meeting. People have felt it nearly impossible to make corrections to the minutes. The conversation is not recorded.

In conclusion, the authors say that workplace investigations are not compatible with the Norwegian labour market model.

“Workplace conflicts can be better dealt with by using existing tools and by focusing on more systematic and preventative approaches. This is also often the more economical choice since cooperation between the social partners is based on solving conflicts at the lowest possible level and avoiding escalation,” says Bitten Nordrik and Tereza Østbø Kuldova.



The social pillar strengthened after EU Porto summit

The EU's informal summit in Porto, Portugal, on 7 - 8 May ended in a declaration which strengthens the social pillar's importance in the Union. To the relief of Nordic member states, the introduction of statutory minimum wages was not mentioned in the final document.

NEWS

10.05.2021

TEXT: BJÖRN LINDAHL, PHOTO: EU

The social agenda meeting in Porto took place in parallel with a top-level meeting of the social partners and other labour market organisation. This was the first time EU prime ministers met face to face since the start of the pandemic. 24 out of 27 prime ministers participated.

Although there is general agreement that “no one should be left behind”, there were power struggles behind the scenes both before and during the summit. Some countries wanted the term “gender equality” to be removed from the declaration.

“I really struggle to understand why. What's the problem?” said Sweden's Prime Minister Stefan Löfven in his post-summit press conference.

Yet he did not consider it to be a major problem because the declaration does refer to the 20 principles which will guide EU cooperation – and in particular principle 2, which is headlined “Gender Equality”.



Four central people at the informal EU summit in Porto, here on a balcony at the mayor's residence. Charles Michel is President of the European Council, David Sassoli is the European Parliament President, Ursula von der Leyen is the EU Commission President and António Costa is Portugal's Prime Minister.

11 member states – the Nordic and Baltic countries plus Bulgaria, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands and Austria – had sent a letter to the summit where they argued that the responsibility for issues like employment, education and skills as well as social issues lies with member states. EU initiatives can complement member states' measures, but they must fully respect the division of power between the nations and the Commission.

The main cause for writing the letter was the issue of statutory minimum wages, along with fear for the future of the Nordic model. Despite the Commission's assurances that countries that have collective bargaining systems should not be forced to introduce minimum wages, there is a fear that this might still happen if the EU Court of Justice intervenes, as it did in the Laval case.

Swedish LO also points out that the EU's Legal Service says there are considerable legal obstacles for adopting a directive with the content of the one the Commission has put forward.

Luca Visentini, General Secretary of the European Trade Union Confederation, said he understood why some countries argued hard that decisions should be made on the lowest suitable level.

"Rightly so, when national systems and practices work well in improving living and working conditions of citizens.

"But when, on the contrary, we face divergence, inequalities, unfair competition, well then that's the time for cooperation, coordination, exchange of best practices. It's the time for better and more ambitious legislation, for earmarking European and national resources for upward convergence, economic and social cohesion," Luca Visentini told the social partners' summit.

"Crown jewel"

Ursula von der Leyen did not mention statutory minimum wages in her summit speech, and only referred to the directive on wage transparency presented by the Commission. But during concluding remarks she did mention the minimum wages:

"I am a strong believer in collective bargaining, I am a strong believer in strong trade unions and employer associations. They know exactly all the details and they can bargain really targeted tailor-made wages – that is necessary.

"But if they are not there, if you have no trade unions in place in a region or a sector, if there are no employer associations that are always caring for the fairness among the employees, well, you cannot say: 'Well, then there is no minimum wage'. Then, we need alternative proposals. And that is what the framework is for: to give guidance for the process of how you can find an appropriate tailor-made minimum wage in such cases," said von der Leyen. She asserted that she preferred collective bargaining, which she described as "the crown jewel".

More education

Several speakers highlighted the importance of education as a way out of the Corona crisis, and that it is also important in the face of other major changes like digitalisation.



“Europe needs creative thinking and knowledgeable people in order to move forwards with the digital and green transition. The conclusion is clear: Human knowledge is Europe’s most important resource. That is why the EU should aim to have the highest education levels in the world,” said the Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin.

The Porto declaration introduced the notion that GDP per capita should not be the only measure for countries’ progress:

“We welcome, as another success of European social dialogue, that the European Social Partners have made a joint proposal for an alternative set of indicators to measure economic, social and environmental progress, supplementing GDP as welfare measure for inclusive and sustainable growth.”

In March, the EU Commission presented an action plan for how social rights should be realised over the next ten years.

- At least 78% of people aged 20-64 should have a job by 2030.
- 60% of all adults should have access to further education every year.
- The number of people at risk of poverty should be reduced by 15 million (including five million children).

One result from the Porto summit is that social policy developments should be discussed by the European Council – the EU’s top political body – at least once a year. This happens within the framework of the so-called European Semester, where member states coordinate economic and labour market policy. Now the other issues within the social pillar will also be treated there.