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Development of sustainable work – is there a future for a Nordic model

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1. Introduction

The Nordic countries have so far been able to develop and maintain an extensive welfare society where key welfare facilities such as child care, education, elderly care and healthcare are provided as rights to all citizens and funded by the taxpayers. An important foundation for the Nordic welfare society is a high level of social capital with trust in both people and institutions.

The labour market play a key role for the welfare society. It is characterized by a strong tradition for collaboration between employers and employees, and one important result is a tradition for workplace employee involvement which is recognized and expected by both employers and employees. The result is a high level of job satisfaction but with the influence follows also a higher responsibility which may stressful..

The welfare society as well as the labour market are challenged by globalisation and the economic crisis. The question for this paper is how the Nordic labour market model can be developed building on existing achievements and meeting the challenges from the increasing international competition and the economic constraints.

2. The labour market

There are differences between the labour market in the Nordic countries but also similarities which are particular significant in comparison with other industrialized countries (Hasle & Sørensen, 2013). It is developed in a long historical process which led to high membership density among both employees and employers and to mutual recognition of the two parties. Based on this joint recognition, the two parties developed an extensive collaborative system with nationwide collective agreements and day to day collaboration at workplaces. The state supports the collaborative system legislation and funding among others for labour courts, the work environment and vocational training.

The collaborative labour market is not free from differences in interest and conflicts but is has for several decades helped to secure relatively high wages and good labour conditions compared to many other countries. However, for the last decade globalisation and other societal changes are challenging the system. Many - especially unskilled - jobs are outsourced, the number of precarious jobs are growing, union density is falling and the increased global competition is putting stronger pressure on rationalization activities.

3. Sustainable work

The Nordic labour market model has influenced work. Comparative studies show that employees in the Nordic countries have more autonomy, less tensions with management and higher job satisfaction than most other European countries.

To some extent this situation made it possible to develop new forms of work organization in the Nordic countries. A number of collaborative work systems with the socio-technical systems, the control-demand-social support model and the developmental work as the most important examples have been developed and elements of these have been widely applied (Gallie, 2009).

However, the crisis as well as the increasing global competition in the private sector and budget constraints in the public sector hampers the application of these work systems. There is therefore a still stronger push for more effective work systems, and management looks yet again for inspiration from big consultancy firms and influential business school in the USA. The consequence may be ever increasing performance demands with a risk of long term tear and wear of the employees as well as increasing stress.

There is, therefore, a need for new work systems which are sustainable in the way that they are both healthy and efficient at the same time. Whereas the traditional rationalization approaches pressure employees to run faster, the Nordic work systems may have a bias towards creating good jobs with less emphasis on efficiency, although it is claimed that a good job will be efficient by itself due to the well-being and motivation of employees, but this understanding does not seem to secure the necessary priority of efficiency.

The high social capital constitutes a strong point of departure for such an approach as it is a measure for the ability of a group to collaborate in order to carry out joint activities. It is both directed toward performance – carry out the activity – and it supports health, as groups and individuals thrive with high levels of trust and respects. One important point is, therefore, to nurture social capital which so far has been taken for granted but is now threatened by developments at the labour market. Another important point is to pay increased attention to the content of the work – how can the core task be defined and how can groups' and individuals' contribution to the core task be made transparent. Such a focus on the core task will contribute to the employees experience of meaning of work - a key issue for well-being at work which is often overlooked in the work environment discourse.

Even though rationalization strategies such as lean have a bad reputation, they can also be utilized in the development of sustainable work systems. Lean provides tools to understand the flow of work processes and how the work is adding value to customers and citizens and thereby lean also opens for the possibility to enhance meaning of work.

Another important element in the development of new work systems is to build innovation activities into the work. The speed of change is now so fast, and even though we can try to slow it down, it is increasingly necessary to be innovative in order to adjust products and services to ever changing circumstances. Such innovative practices need to involve all employees in order to be effective. It is not sufficient to leave innovation to a small group of managers and technical experts.

The conclusion is that stakes are high, and there is a pressing need for working life practitioners and researchers to be involved in the development of sustainable productive and healthy work systems, otherwise a deterioration of the Nordic working life model with all its benefits may be the consequence.

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