

# The Nordic Model of Work Organization

Bjørn Gustavsen

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**Abstract** There are a number of international comparisons of work organization, where the Nordic countries emerge with the most widespread application of such ideas as freedom and learning in work. Two questions arise: first, what are the reasons? Second: what does it mean to apply ideas like freedom and learning in work? The intensive use of specialization as a strategy for productivity occurring during the first part of the previous century led, in the 1950s, to the emergence of initiatives to promote productivity through alternative forms of work organization. “Human relations”, “Quality of working life” and “Lean production” were the main movements to appear out of this turn. The Quality of working life movement, with its demand for a radical redesign of work roles, gained its strongest foothold in the Nordic countries. This article traces the points of origin of this development and provides an overview of the initiatives that have emerged over the years to promote freedom and learning in work. While the notion of “the good work” as work expressing freedom and learning has remained stable, ideas about how to create it have been subject to major changes. While the road to new forms of work organization was originally seen as the implementation of alternative criteria for job design, the ideas dominating today focus on learning, broad participation and a strong link between productivity and innovation. The ability to develop learning-oriented forms of work organization is strongly linked to the constructivist capacity of society.

**Keywords** Work organization · Learning organization · Nordic model · Constructivism · Quality of working life movement

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B. Gustavsen (✉)  
Work Research Institute, Box 6954, St. Olavs Plass, N-0130 Oslo, Norway  
e-mail: bjoern.gustavsen@afi-wri.no

## Introduction

According to Gallie [20], there is a high degree of agreement concerning “the good work”. From the Marxist left to the neo-liberal right, variety, learning, freedom to take initiatives, participation in decisions concerning the job, and the possibility of developing social contacts, are generally held forth. Disagreements do not pertain so much to the nature of the good work as to how it should be brought about. What forces and actors are needed to *create* the good work? The answers given over the years are many, ranging from management education to revolution. It is within this context that a specific “Nordic model” has appeared [6]. This model can be described in different ways, but its core element is a co-operation between organized labor market parties, and between these parties on the one hand and the state/the public on the other. It is often assumed that the good work emerges as a direct consequence of this co-operation (i.e., [35]). The argument is that co-operation on the central level will diffuse to the local level and promote co-operation and mutual trust between management and employees in the workplaces. However, even though the Nordic countries (here taken to refer to Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden) show a wider diffusion of the good work than the rest of Europe [19], the Nordic countries also show a broad set of measures to *promote* the good work. If the good work appeared as an automatic consequence of central co-operation in working life, there would be little need for special agreements on workplace development, programs to promote new forms of work organization, and similar. Although no exact comparative data are available on this point, it is fairly certain that there are more such initiatives in the Nordic countries than in Europe in general [1, 23]. At best, there is a relationship *between* “the Nordic model”, the emergence of initiatives to promote the good work and the emergence of the good work itself.

“The Nordic model” appeared during the first decades of the previous century; of particular importance was the development that occurred in the 1930s when the social democrats came into government. The good work as defined above was, however, not an issue at this time. Although unequivocal comparative data on the level of nations is lacking also on this point, i.e. Johansson [30] assumes that the introduction of rationalization through Taylorism took, in the period 1930–1970, place in a more intensive way in Sweden than in perhaps any other European country. It took more than three decades before the emergent tripartite co-operation inherent in the Nordic model started to generate non-Taylorist forms of work organization. Similar pertains to the other Nordic countries, although none of them had as intensive an application of Taylorism as Sweden. To Denmark and Norway, Taylorism largely came after the end of World War II, as part of the conditions associated with the Marshal Aid program. We need, in other words, not only to explain the emergence of specific initiatives to promote the good work, we also need to clarify when and how the turn from intensive Taylorism to other forms of work organization took place and why it took place.

The purpose of this contribution is, first, to trace the roots of the idea of “the good work” in a Nordic context; second, to look at how the various initiatives to promote the good work have been shaped and carried through and, third, to see to what learning they have given rise concerning how to *create* “the good work”.

## Characteristics of the Nordic Model

The pattern of co-operation and trust generally associated with the Nordic model is often linked to such aspects of the Nordic societies as the limited size of their populations, their location in the European periphery, their ethnic homogeneity, and the like. These societies should, so to say, harbor an inherent peacefulness and cooperative orientation. However, looking at the history of struggles and conflicts it is seen that the Nordic countries were no different from the general picture. There were times during the period between the world wars when Sweden and Norway both were on top of European statistics on days lost in conflict relative to the size of the working population [27, 30]. Long after the end of World War II, Finland had a conflict level close to the European average; and the European country with the highest conflict level of all—even beyond Italy—was Iceland. “The Nordic model” is the result of processes of social construction, not the outcome of historically given “national characteristics”.

This point can be illustrated by comparing two of the major economic actors in Europe during the period between the world wars: Rudolf Hilferding and Ernst Wigforss. Hilferding was a radical socialist who served as minister of finance in Germany during the Weimar Republic; Ernst Wigforss was a key actor in the Swedish social democratic party and minister of finance during most of the period from 1932 until his retirement around 1950. Although being not unlike in perspectives on society, they came to pursue very different policies. Hilferding became much of a *laissez-faire* politician on the grounds that either the market will solve Germany’s economic problems, with an ensuing growth in the support for the social democrats, or it will not, and there will be a revolution from the left. Both options were, in his view, favorable. Contrary to this, Wigforss came to pursue a policy of interventionism even more Keynesian than that of Keynes himself. Wigforss did not believe in the ability of “objective forces”, be it the market, or a historically specific configuration of productive forces, to create the kind of society he wanted. This society had to be created through conscious human effort (the source of this comparison is a presentation, by the economist Branko Horvath, in one of the Dubrovnik seminars on self-management held during the 1970s. It has not been possible to trace any finished article)

Within a vocabulary largely emerging out of the political discourses around the turn of the previous century, the Nordic societies are often seen as being “in between” liberalism and more or less radical socialism. They are referred to by concepts like “mixed economies”, “state controlled market economies” and similar. At least as a historical point of departure, liberal as well as state controlled economies appear as a result of “objective forces”, more or less beyond human control. They can be promoted, or maybe modified, but they cannot be avoided. Society is, in this sense, in the grip of *mechanisms*. Contrary to this, the Nordic model emerged out of a belief in “constructivism”; in the ability of people to break with historical forces, or heavy determinants, to gain control over their own future. This is the background against which we have to understand the development of work organization: Given that society is to be constructed, how are these processes of construction to take place? If they are to be handled by small central elites only, the pattern will easily be so close to the state controlled economies as makes for little

difference. Consequently, in constructivist society the issue of *participation* appears in force.

### **Expanding the Nordic Model from Reductions in Conflicts to Increases in Productivity**

The Nordic model was based on the idea of reducing conflicts in working life through pooling the measures available to, respectively, the employers, the unions and the government, resulting in substantial packages covering a broad range of measures and institutions. With less conflicts productivity would increase, making room for wage increases, reduction in working time, and welfare programs. As goals of this kind became more ambitious, a reduction in conflicts was, however, not enough. Productivity was not only a question of getting people to show up for work, it was also a question of what they did when they were there. This was the point where Taylorism entered the scene (i.e., [30]). At the time, Taylorism emerged as a well developed, rational strategy for the pursuance of productivity in work, and its point of origin in the US told in its favor. The Nordic countries had a high rate of emigration to the United States and it was thought that this was because the US could offer more employment and higher wages due to a more rationally organized working life. Rather than prevent, or at least modify, Taylorism, the emergent cooperation and mutual trust characterizing the Nordic model actually came to boost the use of Taylorism. Whatever emerged in terms of voices of dissent came from the union movement, where some actors called Taylorism “the devil’s work”. However, it is reason to believe that even from the side of the union movement, the protests were less than from the largely craft based union movements in the Anglo-American world [11]. What was it that led to a turn in this development?

Throughout the whole period of early industrialization, the process was accompanied by a debate on industrial democracy. The issues and proposals raised in this debate were largely directed at ownership, at the rights of union representatives, and at worker representation in various bodies, in particular the board of directors in joint stock companies. It seems, in other words, as if the prime effect of the Nordic model in the early phase was to “pull the questions upwards”: “industrial democracy” yes, but in a form that could create new platforms for political and representative actors rather than for the workers in general [16]. Rather than emanating from the Nordic model itself, it seems that international movements were decisive in initiating a turn of direction towards new forms of work organization; movements where research played a crucial role. While the union-based critique of Taylorism focused on the destruction of the professional content of work, the growing work life research came to lay bare a more complex set of effects.

### **The Research-based Critique of Taylorism**

A first major point to appear out of studies of the effects of work on people was that one-sided work led to a one-sided use of the human body, and associated problems of physiological wear and tear (i.e., [5]). Second, similar processes could be seen as

mental and social issues were concerned; one-sided work could demand certain abilities, such as the ability to concentrate strongly on certain aspects of the work situation, while such human capabilities as the performance of judgment, the taking of initiative, and similar, were left to wither away (i.e., [8]). Third, specialized work tended to break down social relationships in the workplace, resulting in alienation and fragmentation (i.e., [7]). Fourth, the lack of social relationships had a negative effect on the ability to master change and innovation (i.e. [10]). Fifth, there tended to be a spillover from one-sided work and a passive work role to a passive existence during non-working hours and a corresponding lack of participation in the democratic activities of society (i.e. [37]). Sixth, the performance premium wage systems generally associated with Taylorism tended to create instability and to undermine the central control of wage development associated with the Nordic model (i.e. [34]).

Research did not only develop new perspectives on the effects of intensive specialization, the question of how to perform changes away from Taylorism and towards alternative forms was also raised (i.e., [16]).

### **Alternatives to Taylorism**

Critique, such as mentioned above, practical experience, or both led, in the post World War II era, to a search for alternatives to Taylorism. The search was many-sided and included numerous actors of different types. No one can oversee all the suggestions, studies, practical examples and other impulses that emerged out of this context. However, in the light of hindsight, there are reasons to identify in particular three “schools of thought”, or “movements”, as eventually becoming the main ones: “the human relations” movement, “the quality of working life” movement and “the lean enterprise movement”.

The human relations movement had its point of origin in the US as far back as around 1930, and a series of experiments in an electro-mechanical assembly plant. The main message to emanate out of these experiments was that the social context of work—“togetherness” and “belongingness”—was of critical importance to people’s reactions to their working conditions [45]. Out of this emerged a movement for reform that took, as its point of departure, the idea of changing the social context of work through, for instance, more participative forms of leadership, the systematic use of teams, and the introduction of personnel management as a function of its own in the enterprises.

The quality of working life movement emanated out of a project performed in the immediate post World War II era in coal mines in Britain. Recently nationalized, and made subject to heavy investments in new technology, it was discovered that absenteeism and indicators on mental illness in the mines were increasing. A study showed that the investments in new technology had been accompanied by an increase in specialization and a deconstruction of the kind of work teams that had traditionally characterized work in the mines. In these teams—referred to as semi-autonomous work groups—the members shared a set of different tasks and decided themselves on who was to perform what task at each and every time. It turned out, furthermore, that in some places where these

groups were still in existence in spite of the new technology, productivity per head was higher than in the new and more specialized organization. Contrary to the human relations school, the movement to emanate out of these studies argued that to combat the effects of highly specialized work it would not be enough to change the social context of work, the call was for a more radical redesign of the work itself [[17, 50]].

The lean enterprise movement is generally associated with developments in Japan, in particular in the automobile industry, with Toyota in the leading role. When automobile production started in Japan after the end of World War II, it was in a market where few people owned a car (one in 500 in 1950, as against one in 20 in, for instance, Sweden), production equipment was worn and scarce, and the cars were strange and full of mechanical faults. In this situation, Eiji Toyoda and his production manager decided that automobile production could not be developed on the basis of mass production of highly standardized models. They saw the market as calling for differentiated products but of higher quality and use value. On this background, they decided to go for more flexibility in the production lines as well as a strong upgrading of quality. The notion of quality circle was introduced, where the assembly line workers were taken out of their primary job to help identify and correct errors. Through this introduction of parallel tasks in a parallel organization, the assembly line monotony was to some extent broken. The structuring of each production line to handle more than one type of product also contributed to variation in work. This was the point of origin for what later, through a number of steps and transformations, has become known as the “lean” movement [51]. In the controversy between the human relations movement and the quality of working life movement on the need for redesign of jobs, the lean movement takes, in principle, a middle position. The workers are to be more active and oriented towards learning than on the traditional assembly line, but the lean movement clearly did not recognize a need for redesign of jobs comparable to the quality of working life movement.

From the 1950s and onwards, these were the movements that to a large extent came to appear as alternatives to Taylorism. They could enter into various forms of combination with each other but they could also be seen as standing in a relationship of competition. During the first decades after the end of World War II it was clearly the human relations movement that was the dominant one. Stepwise, however, it was challenged by the lean movement, originally emerging on the international scene as the quality movement. The quality of working life movement, with its demand for a more radical transformation of jobs, was never more than an outsider in this company. It came, however, to exert a strong influence on the discourses on work and it was this movement that came to the Nordic countries.

### **The Quality of Working Life Movement and the Nordic Countries**

The turn from Taylorism to work oriented towards freedom and learning occurred in the period from the early 1960s to the middle 1970s and consisted of a substantial number of events and associated actors. First out was the Industrial Democracy program in Norway [16, 17]. This was followed by several initiatives in Sweden; the most outstanding of these was the new factories movement [48].

The British researchers behind the notion of autonomy in work were looking for places to put their ideas into reality. Their base—the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations—was strongly influenced by the ideas of Kurt Lewin (i.e., [33]) concerning the action potential of social research. An initiative to make the National Coal Board in Britain launch a program for autonomy in work was, however, rejected; so were similar initiatives towards other actors in Britain and other countries. The breakthrough came in Norway where a continuous discourse on industrial democracy had started to merge with the discourse on Taylorism, creating a pressure for reform. Because of the commitment to rationalization from the labor market parties centrally, they also came to receive much of this pressure. When a group of researchers headed by Einar Thorsrud presented the arguments of the quality of working life movement, and offered to conduct field experiments to demonstrate their validity, the labor market parties decided to take an initiative. Through a joint committee they decided to go for a program with three elements: first, an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of representative systems as the road to the good work; second, a series of field experiments to clarify the potential for change in work organization, and, third, a program for the broader diffusion of the experiences to emanate out of the first two phases [16].

The field experiments were launched in the middle 1960s and reached their peak with a project in a plant for the production of fertilizers under construction by the largest industrial group in Norway: Hydro. While the original intention was to run the plant through three separate units of organization, each hierarchically structured—one for the factory, one for maintenance and one for the control room—the introduction of shift groups where each group was responsible for all functions, led to a significant lowering of the number of people needed to run the plant and to a clear improvement in regularity and quality. Various other issues were explored as well, for instance competence-based salary systems instead of systems based on hour-to-hour performance. “Process operator” was introduced as a new category of skilled work [17]

In spite of the success of the first experiments, the diffusion phase proved difficult in Norway. The labor market parties took several steps—such as training- and information programs—to promote diffusion but the process seemed to be slow [27]. A number of new projects emerged, but not on a scale sufficient to ensure that the door was opened to working life in general.

In the wake of the development in Norway, Sweden saw several initiatives to promote the ideas of the quality of working life movement (for an overview, see [48]). One was a program emanating from the labor market parties together, in approximately the same way as in Norway. Another was a program specially designed to promote democracy and participation in publicly owned enterprises. Although emanating on the side of the employers, the new factories movement evolved according to the patterns of co-operation laid down in laws and agreements, but did not call for union- or worker involvement out of “the ordinary”. A resource unit was established at the Employers’ Confederation centrally, but the projects were initiated and run by the enterprises themselves. At one time, it was estimated that about 500 enterprises were involved in the development [46]. Although this figure was far from uncontroversial, it indicated a degree of diffusion well beyond that occurring in Norway.

The internationally most well-known case within this movement emerged with the opening, in 1974, of a new factory for the final assembly of automobiles by Volvo. Located in the town of Kalmar, this factory was based on replacing the assembly line with trolleys that could be moved fairly freely around in the plant. Through keeping the object stationary for longer periods of time, it became possible to expand the work cycles far beyond what was possible on an assembly line, and to introduce forms of assembly where a group could be made responsible for a major part of the automobile. With a strong focus on production technology, the new factories movement came to explore a number of related issues as well, such as mechanization to do away with physically demanding work, or to create fully automated lines; new forms of assembly; the development of “factories within factories”, and more [47].

The Scandinavian projects triggered off the broader international quality of working life (QWL) movement. Like all other movements, the QWL movement cannot be made subject to a precise description, be it in terms of what parts of the world were involved, nor what projects or other changes actually emerged. The closest to an overall description can be found in Ejnatten [12]. The movement had its prime from about 1970 to the middle 1980s, after which it died out as a movement reflected in specific events, such as conferences and publications. The reasons may be many. When the movement appeared it was made subject to much discussion and criticism, in particular from the Marxist left where co-operation was seen as a prime mechanism for management manipulation of the workers. Numerous other points emerged as well, for instance that the movement neglected the role of management, put too much emphasis on participation at the expense of business concerns, or vice versa, put too little—or too much—emphasis on technology, overlooked the need to develop the union movement before it could enter into co-operation with owners and managers, and much more. From the position of the world as it looks today, these points are mostly of historical interest. There is no later experience that bears out any of them as being of major practical relevance. From the position of today, it is more fruitful to discuss the QWL movement in terms of a comparison with the other two major movements for work reform:

In addition to arguing a radical need for total redesign of jobs over compressed periods of time, the QWL movement relied on a substantial number of projects in a number of countries that did, at least on the surface, present a far from unified picture of what this movement was “about” (Ejnatten [12] provides an overview of cases developed up until the late 1980s). With its basis in one single enterprise (Toyota) the quality/lean movement was far more easy for practitioners to use as a basis for learning.

The human relations movement had its basis in research as well, but contrary to the QWL movement, the human relations movement soon gained a major platform in education, in particular in the business schools. In this way, human relations became a broad avenue to the professionalization of “the human concerns in work”. The QWL movement made little effort to establish itself in the same way.

Insofar as we want to explain the lack of broad recognition of the QWL movement after the middle 1980s these are the kind of issues we need to focus on. However, even if the QWL movement eventually died out as a broad international

school of thought on work organization, its impact is far from dead. In fact, freedom and learning in work, and participation in decisions affecting one's work, are criteria that live on. They have shaped the operational notion of the good work more than any other school of thought.

According to the European work organization surveys, the good work can be found everywhere. What differs is the degree, or scope. On this point, the Nordic countries are generally in the lead [35]. Whatever may have happened to the QWL movement in general, there are forces and actors that keep the ideas alive. However, what is it that is kept alive? Although the QWL movement gave major contributions to the operationalization of the good work, it can hardly claim to be the sole inventor of this notion. What was it, then, that could be carried on? First and foremost notions about how to *create* the good work. It is this element of “constructivism” that sets the Nordic countries apart. Being rooted in “the Nordic model” in general, the notion that the good work has to be created rather than discovered has all the time been a main perspective.

### Initiatives after the Field Experiments

Looking at all the Nordic countries over the whole period from, say, the middle 1970s and until today, we face a complex picture in terms of initiatives to promote the good work, being this as the main topic, or as one of several topics. Most of the initiatives have emerged on the level of the individual organization, but a number have been collective. The following are some of the most important:

During the 1970s, all the Nordic countries revised their policies and legislation on the issue of health in work. In the discourses underlying the reforms, work organization came to stand forth as an important topic, partly because of its direct impact on health, partly because of its impact on worker activity in the workplace and, through this, on all workplace issues. The main concept of the reforms was changed from “health and safety” to “work environment”. Some of the criteria to be promoted by the QWL movement were given direct expression in the Norwegian Work Environment Act [21] while the other Nordic countries covered the issue of work organization through their general standards for the good work environment.

In 1982, the main labor market parties in Sweden as well as in Norway made agreements on workplace development, not with the intention of promoting specific versions of the good work, but with the intention of making enterprise level actors more aware of such issues as work organization, leadership and co-operation, and making them take new initiatives in this field. An agreement between the main labor market parties in Denmark on local co-operation functions in much the same way [23].

Throughout the 1980s, a Swedish Fund—the Work Environment Fund—was given a substantial increase in its budget and assigned the task of launching a series of workplace development programs in support of the agreement on development. Over a period of about 10 years, a dozen programs were launched, covering issues like technology, organization, participation, leadership, health and safety and womens' position in working life [41].

The Norwegian partners had no comparable relationship to the government but launched their own program in support of the agreement. From the middle 1990s,

this was supplemented by a research and development program financed largely by the Research Council of Norway, called Enterprise Development 2000 [25]. In 2000, this program was replaced by a program called “Value Creation 2010”, and in 2007 this program with a program called “Measures for Regional Innovation”. This program combination is, by the year 2010, estimated to have reached about 2,000 workplaces, although with variable degrees of impact (this estimate is made by the secretariat for the promotion of joint initiatives set down by the Confederation of Norwegian Business and Industry and the Confederation of Norwegian Trade Unions)

Out of a commission set down to make proposals for the further development of workplace democracy, there emerged, in Norway, a state initiative for the promotion of the good work. The initiative was given expression in the Norwegian Work Life Center, which was given a steering committee with members from all the main organizations in working life. During the period 1988 to 1993, the center developed projects in several hundred workplaces, private as well as public [43].

In the period 1990–1995, the Work Life Fund was in operation in Sweden. With a budget of ten billion SEK (about one billion Euros) to spend over the 5-year period, and reaching about half of all Swedish workplaces, this is probably the most substantial initiative to promote the good work to appear anywhere [26].

Denmark saw, in the 1990s, two substantial programs: one to counteract monotonous work, and one to promote work as the source of human development [29]. They did not encompass resources comparable to those of the Work Life Fund, but they were both national programs.

After the breakdown of the Soviet trade around 1990, a search for new economic platforms was triggered off in Finland. In addition to strong investments in technological development and innovation, a substantial program for the promotion of new and more innovation-supportive forms of work organization was launched. This program has undergone several phases but is still ongoing (a recent overview of the program, with a particular emphasis on projects including more than one enterprise, can be found in [2]).

## **Main Transformations of Ideas and Strategies**

Even if we limit the discussion to the initiatives mentioned above, with a view to presenting backgrounds, ideas, strategies, projects and outcomes, we would have to go far beyond the framework of this contribution. Instead, we will look into the issue of change in approaches to the creation of the good work on a more general level. Are there trends that more or less cut across the initiatives to form more general patterns? When, in the discussion below, we will focus on aspects of change from a “from-to” perspective, it is necessary to underline that major simplifications are made. It is not so much a question of either or as of a relative shift in focus. With this reservation we can talk about a number of mutually dependent transformations:

- From an emphasis on implementation (of something given “from before” or “from outside”) to an emphasis on local learning and local constructivism

- From a split between demonstration and diffusion to a merger of demonstration and diffusion
- From single organizations to various configurations of organizations as the prime unit of change
- From single source to multisource learning
- From initiatives for change directed primarily towards conditions internal to each organization, to initiatives directed primarily towards relationships between organizations
- From an emphasis on “leading edge cases” to an emphasis on lifting the middle
- From a material to a communicative perception of autonomy
- From psychological forces to institutional expressions of “the good work”

Below, each of these aspects will be commented on, however briefly.

### **From Implementation to Local Constructivism**

It was quite early in the QWL movement recognized that the application of research driven field experiments created a number of difficulties. Few workplaces were willing to subject themselves to “experimenting”, however good the cause. It was necessary to develop another balance between external and internal resources and the notion of “participative design” saw daylight in the middle 1970s [15]. More scope had to be given to the ideas and experiences of the local parties, and projects had to be shaped to give room for these inputs. A question to appear out of this “turn” was how to ensure that the local parties would still go for the good work and not use the increased local freedom to, say, reproduce Taylorism. The answer was that since the good work was seen as founded in the psychological constitution of people, they would strive for the good work as soon as they got the opportunity. External resources such as research would have to see to it that this opportunity was given, but could otherwise rely on the human forces themselves to create the desired outcome. This change, which was general to the QWL movement, made it possible to go from experiments in a very limited number of workplaces to reach a greater number of organizations. It did not, however, ensure the kind of widespread diffusion that the movement aimed at, and the reasons will appear under the other points below.

### **From a Split to a Merger between Demonstration and Diffusion**

The idea of creating a few star cases and then expect others to follow, also started to attract question marks at an early point. There may be many reasons why enterprises do not want to copy each other, from “not invented here” to the argument that local conditions are (always) different. During the 1970s, a shift in perspective occurred on this point, towards seeing change as encompassing larger communities of enterprises where all were on the move, but where the changes that occurred in each enterprise was not a copy of what others had done. Each move in the process would be unique to the enterprise where it was performed, but it was built on ideas

emerging out of the exchange with the other enterprises. One of the first practical expressions of this perspective was a so-called job design seminar organized by the labor market parties in Norway throughout most of the 1970s. Six enterprises participated each time, ran somewhat different projects, but exchanged experiences with each other. External inputs pertained, as generally in the participative design phase, to how to create opportunities for all members of each organization to become a participant in the process [18]. Relying on exchange of experience between the organizations rather than on broad inputs from outside, this was a more cost-efficient strategy for change than the original field experiments. It did not, however, in itself solve the problem of broad diffusion.

### **From Single Organizations to Various Configurations of Organizations as the Prime Unit of Change**

With a strategy like the one unfolding in the job design seminar it was obvious that a broader application of the notion of co-operation between organizations had to take place. Even though the seminar reached six enterprises each time, and had reached about 40 altogether during its run in the 1970s, this was still far too limited an impact to meet the demand for national diffusion. How to move further? There were two perspectives to this challenge: make each network encompass more enterprises and/or create more networks. These issues came on the agenda in the 1980s, first with one of the programs of the Swedish Work Environment Fund [22, 38]. To some extent building on the experiences of the job design seminar, this program was based on using four enterprises as the point of departure, and then let the process itself focus strongly on the interplay *between* the enterprises, in the hope of making each “group of four” grow to a larger network through attracting other organizations. This was a research and development program and the research support was, also for the first time in one program, built on involving a number of research groups distributed all over the country, rather than one single central unit. As pointed out by Naschold [38], the program was neither of a duration nor in command of the resources needed to really achieve, on a broad front, the notion of networks growing out of nodes of four. In some cases this development did, however, take place, not least as a continuation occurring after the formal termination of the program (after 5 years). From around 1990, this kind of development was helped forth by a growing interest in enterprise co-operation in general. Porter’s book on clusters appeared [42], to be followed by a broad range of studies of clusters in the Nordic countries. The interest in inter-enterprise co-operation was growing and new networks were formed, although generally for other purposes than the promotion of the good work. It was, however, possible to launch initiatives to make them focus more strongly on this issue.

### **From Single Source to Multisource Learning**

All the major movements for work reform started out with the assumption that there is “one best way” in which to organize work, and that the main practical

challenge is to find—or create—cases that could demonstrate this way. In principle, it would be necessary with only one case, since this is all that is needed if there is one best way. When difficulties emerged with diffusing change from “outstanding cases” there emerged a corresponding shift in learning patterns. When change had to be organized in clusters, or networks, of organizations, and with a growing emphasis on interactive learning, each participating organization had to relate to impulses from different sources and organize these impulses into new maps of knowledge. Latour [32] uses the concept of “hybrid” to describe such mixed, or composite, maps.

### From Internal to Relational Emphasis

With a growing recognition of initiatives for change emerging in configurations of organizations, rather than from “inside” single organizations, the construction of the configuration as such becomes important. Several concepts denoting possible configurations are at play: network, cluster, development coalition, industrial district, (learning) region and innovation system, to mention those most frequently used. There is a vast literature on these phenomena, offering a large number of structural descriptions of each one. It has been noted (i.e., [40]) that there is considerably less on how the various configurations are *created*. To some extent this is correct. The problem is, however, not so much what research and information are available, as what constitutes a visible discourse formation. With its roots in economic theory, innovation studies tend to acquire a structuralist orientation, and generally to avoid looking at the fairly rich, but often dispersed, literature on change and development. The primary need is for studies that can bridge this gap; one recent effort can be found in Ekman et al. [13].

When organizations learn from each other it implies that impulses are crossing organizational boundaries. These impulses can be said to constitute “flows” or “streams” within the configuration as a whole. While the Swedish Work Life Fund was originally oriented towards projects in single organizations, experience gained through its operations led to an increased emphasis on what happens in the terrain between organizations. Towards the end, the notion of boundaryless flow-organization appeared as the main strategic concept of the Fund. This implies that it is the flows that cross organizational boundaries that shape the individual organization, and that influencing these flows is also the key to influencing what happens within each organization [26].

This recognition also opens up for initiatives that can reach broadly out in working life. If organizations are to be changed “one-by-one” there is no way in which programs driven by research, consultants, the labor market parties centrally, or anyone else, can ever achieve something even remotely resembling national diffusion. When working life as a whole is seen as a set of relationships carrying many different kinds of flows, new possibilities for exercising strategic influence through influencing these flows occur. This perspective is still in an early phase and cannot easily be made subject to any kind of simple illustration. It is possible, however, to see working life in a country like Norway from this kind of perspective. Most of the efforts to promote the good work have occurred within the joint core area of the Confederation of Business and Industry and the Confederation of Trade

Unions, which is largely “traditional industry”. Most of working life in Norway is not industry and there are a number of confederations of employers and unions besides the two main ones. It seems, however, as if what happens within this “traditional” core area is the main generator of impulses for working life as a whole. Up to now—with the lean movement as the latest fashion—what happens in industry constitutes the main flow of impulses into the rest of working life. In this way we are to some extent back to the notion of “the leading edge case” followed by later diffusion, but only to some extent. The main impulse generators are in themselves networks or industrial environments, in Norway represented, at the moment, by such regional configurations as those found in Raufoss [31], Kongsberg and Grenland [44]; all three areas with a large number of different enterprises and all representing a renewal of traditional industrial regions.

### **From an Emphasis on Leading Edge Cases to an Emphasis on Lifting the Middle**

When the unit of change to an increasing degree is turned into networks with essentially horizontal relationships between the participants, the scope for single model cases withers away. Instead, the members will pull each other through generating impulses that move around in the network. Each member is in a position of give and take. If anything is to become leading edge, it is the network rather than the individual enterprise. If the point is to create broad movements in working life, through making each network grow and through making existing networks create spin-offs in the form of new networks, it is the network-generating conditions that have to be placed in focus. Since a network is a set of relationships between essentially equal partners, network-generating conditions will have to aim for equality, rather than differences. This seems to be an area where the Nordic countries offer some advantages. Employee- and employer organizations have a high degree of membership, education and training are based on national schemes and classifications, an active labor market policy contributes to moving people around between workplaces, and so on [35]. In general, there are many open doors between enterprises, making the formation of various forms of inter-organizational relationships relatively easy. It is important to note, however, that the demand for equality pertains to communication and mutual understanding, not to the “socio-technical” characteristics of each enterprise. On a deeper level, this makes the majority of workplaces “fairly good” without, however, easily creating outstanding cases. Here we touch upon the main explanation why the Nordic economies perform as well as they do on a collective level [4], while it is hard to find “star cases” comparable to those often displayed in the US- or Japan-based management literature. In these countries, it seems as if the economy is more hierarchically structured, with shining cases on the top but a substantial distance to the bottom.

### **From a Material to a Communicative Perception of Autonomy**

In the QWL movement, the notion of autonomy is the core one. When the significance of autonomy in work was first established, autonomy was seen as

dependent upon each worker being member of a group where the group could perform different tasks and decide who was to do what task at each and every time [28]. Since the tasks were strongly linked to the production technology, autonomy emerged as more or less exclusively dependent upon technology (the “socio-technical” perspective, i.e. [14]). There is, of course, no sharp dividing line between this perception of autonomy and a way of looking at autonomy that links it more strongly to the notion of free communication, or the ability to participate in open workplace dialogues [22]. The fluid boundaries notwithstanding, there is a difference in emphasis, and the significance of this difference has been growing over time. The key event in this context was the introduction of the agreements on development, where the need to focus on work organization, co-operation, and local leadership was emphasized, without the parties centrally arguing certain forms of organization as being better than other forms. Instead, they followed up on the principle behind participative design—to see to it that all concerned could become part of the process—and introduced, in this context, communicative instruments, such as a certain kind of conference [24]. This partial shift in perspective makes it possible to see autonomy as linked to such conditions as membership in a free union movement and the procedures followed in labor-management encounters. Such issues as workplace health and safety can, through the use of participation-based mapping processes and similar, promote learning in the workplace irrespective of what kind of job people have. The need for a radical job redesign approach becomes less but more emphasis has to be put on workplace communication [22].

### **From Psychological Forces to Institutional Expressions of the Good Work**

With work organization being subject to agreements, legislation, public programs and campaigns, the notion of the good work becomes objectified and anchored in institutional conditions. This objectification and institutionalization seems to be a major area of difference between the Nordic countries and the more typical market economies. In the market, human forces are generally represented by “psychology”: drives that each individual carries within him- or herself. This may be all to the good, but it also leaves the individual to fence for him- or herself. When the good work becomes institutionally anchored, there is something outside the individual to which the individual can point. The individual can argue that there is an agreement between the main actors in working life that this is what the good work looks like. The good work is not something subject to individual feelings here and now; feelings that can easily be overrun by other concerns.

### **Conclusions**

These “from and to-” points indicate, however briefly, some aspects of the changes in approach to the good work that have become manifest in the Nordic countries during the last two to three decades. Taken together they indicate that the forces and issues involved in making real the good work have been subject to major

transformations. When the various movements representing alternatives to Taylorism first saw daylight, the world was still in the grip of the issues and conflicts of early industrialization. “The worker” was still dressed in blue, was part of a huge mass of identical people, and had to conduct a daily struggle against authoritarian leaders and cocksure experts. Fragmentation and alienation was thought to characterize major parts of the populations in the industrializing countries. Solutions to the problems had to be sought on a mass level, demanding a foundation in general theories and action programs that could cover working life as a whole in one sweeping move. Whereas elements of this perspective may still be valid in relation to parts of working life, major parts show new patterns. A core characteristic of “the knowledge economy” is that all actors, whatever their position in the organization in which they work, is a bearer of knowledge. The knowledge can cover widely different fields, from details in production to views on the global conditions affecting the future of the organization. All the different forms of knowledge are needed, and they stand in a relationship of complementarity to each other. Their bearers constitute different professional communities that have to work together. To be a bearer of knowledge means, furthermore, to be the bearer of the power to transcend, to change, to construct. “The enterprise” has, consequently, to be seen as a set of relationships between professional communities where each community, as well as the relationships between the different communities, is subject to continuous reconstruction. Each enterprise is, furthermore, embedded in a broader set of communities that are also “on the move”. The understanding and development of this kind of phenomenon cannot follow mechanistic principles, the identification of universal reason, or the notion of the one best way. Instead, we have to understand and relate to the fluid, the relational, the boundary-crossing. On the other hand, since it is clearer today than it has ever been that each actor, each organization, each network is part of a series of broader frameworks, with “the global community” as the ultimate level, local constructivism has to be combined with an ability to relate to a broad range of external initiatives and processes. It is in the ability to promote strong local constructivism, while maximizing the ability to consider external impulses, that the core element in competitive strength is found today.

Several of the points of transition mentioned above, correspond to broader international trends. The move from structure and design to learning and constructivism, have counterparts in, for instance, the views on organization development promoted by Nonaka and Takeuchi [39] or Sengi [49]. The emphasis on configurations of organizations working together, corresponds to the broad interest in clusters [42], industrial districts [9], learning regions [3] and innovation systems [36] to mention but some examples. What is more specific to the Nordic countries is to see workplace development not only in a constructivist perspective, but a constructivist perspective on the level of society. To this is linked the major role of the labor market organizations; their co-operation with the government and other authorities; the institutional expression—in laws and agreements—of the good work; the notion of autonomy as anchored in communication rather than material conditions, and the focus on lifting all organizations rather than creating a few outstanding cases and expect diffusion to occur by itself. So far, this has placed the Nordic countries in the lead in making the notion of the good work come real. In fact, in practically all types of international comparisons—ranging from economy to

health and well-being—the Nordic countries come out with high scores, and if a broad range of such studies are combined, they come out on top as a group of their own. It can be argued that they do not only copy the bumble bee in being able to fly in spite of neo-liberalist aero-dynamics, they do in fact copy the jet-liner [4]. At the core of this ability is the broad responsibility for promoting the good work: the common denominator for all aspects of life, from economy to health.

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