

From policy to labour inclusion in practice

Report from the third Nordic expert seminar
on employment and disability



Nordic Welfare
Centre

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Foreword

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Sustainable Development Goals set out in Agenda 2030 require the Nordic countries to create a labour market in which more people are given the right conditions to participate. A high employment rate is a cornerstone of the Nordic welfare model, and all the Nordic countries are dependent on more people finding employment to finance the welfare of the future.

In 2019, the Nordic prime ministers decided that the Nordic region is going to become the most sustainable and integrated region in the world. One of the three strategic priorities for 2024 is to promote a competitive and socially sustainable Nordic region through innovation-based growth and strengthened welfare.

At present, a large proportion of men and women with disabilities are excluded from the labour market in the Nordic region. This proportion has remained constant for a long period of time, and none of the Nordic countries have been able to produce a good answer for how to address this challenge. However, there are a number of major employers in the Nordic region with projects and programmes of their own to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities.

The Nordic Welfare Centre's third Nordic expert seminar on the labour market and disability, which took place in Uppsala in 2018, shows that these actors are looking to exchange experiences and establish networks, but that they generally have little knowledge of or contact with each other. Many employers view support systems as bureaucratic.

A number of Nordic research institutes are working on gathering knowledge relating to workplace inclusion, while at the same time there is a lack of research regarding the effects of government initiatives in the field. Government agencies in the Nordic countries are seeking knowledge on effective measures in other countries.

Disability and the labour market is a priority area within the Programme for the Nordic Council of Ministers' Co-operation on Labour 2018-2021 and the Nordic Council of Ministers' Action Plan for Nordic Co-operation on Disability 2018-2022. With the programme and the action plan as a starting point, the Nordic Welfare Centre is coordinating a project during the period 2019-2020

with the goal of outlining how technological and digital solutions made for the business sector, the public sector and other labour market actors might help create new opportunities, and which measures are required in order to accomplish this.

The project shall produce a Nordic knowledge summary, a collection of examples and a toolbox for employers. It is funded by the Labour Market Committee in the Nordic Committee of Senior Officials for Labour, ÅK-A. The results from the project can provide answers to some of the previously described challenges, and be part of continued and broadened cooperation regarding disability and the workplace.

Proposals

The communication from the Nordic experts is summarised on pages 6 and 7. With the expert seminar as a departure point, the Nordic Welfare Centre presents the following proposals for continued Nordic cooperation regarding disability and the workplace:

- the establishment of a Nordic network for the exchange and dissemination of evidence-based knowledge regarding labour market inclusion of people with disabilities, possibly with a subnetwork for researchers, labour market authorities and major employers in the area. The networks could beneficially be coordinated by the Nordic Welfare Centre. An employer network could be connected to the ILO Business and Disability Network.
- the organisation of a seminar with the Nordic municipal associations regarding themes and how experiences such as those from the Nordic Council of Ministers' integration of disability perspectives in its own operations could be utilised by Nordic municipalities in their role as major employers and important actors in all local Nordic communities.
- the establishment of concrete comparisons of the employer and employee-focused efforts in the Nordic countries, such as the collaboration between the Nordic Welfare Centre, NORDREGIO, Nordic research environments and Nordic labour market authorities.
- the production of a compilation of examples of universally designed work environments and technical solutions to promote labour market inclusion of people with disabilities.
- the encouragement of joint Nordic research and Nordic knowledge compilations regarding indicators on inclusion and the

effects of inclusion, for example, whether companies that assume social responsibility obtain or can obtain market advantages.

Unique expert seminar

In December 2018, a unique seminar was held in Uppsala. For the first time, the Nordic Welfare Centre gathered major corporations and business associations to discuss the inclusion of people with disabilities and how the barriers for inclusion could be torn down.

“Those of us working with policy development have a lot to learn from businesses that work actively with inclusion in practice,” says Lars Rottem Krangnes, senior advisor at the Nordic Welfare Centre.

Labour market participation among people with disabilities can only be increased in one way, by hiring more of these individuals. The main players in increasing this employment level are the businesses. The idea behind the seminar was to utilise knowledge and suggestions from companies and the business sector.

The hope is that bolstering the exchange of experience through networks will contribute to increased inclusion. Authorities and researchers have become involved in the Nordic cooperation on labour market inclusion, but for employer organisations and businesses, systematic inclusion is a new concept.

“The business sector has a very important part to play in this context. A disability does not have to mean reduced work capacity, but it might be necessary to adapt the work environment,” says Lars Rottem Krangnes.

One of the proposals presented at the seminar was the need for businesses to establish a network among themselves. Within the UN’s International Labour Organisation (ILO), there is a network for large international companies that works with issues regarding individuals with disabilities – the Business and Disability Network. Very few companies based in the Nordic countries are part of this network. A similar network could be launched within the scope of the Nordic cooperation.

Views of the experts

A recurring opinion was that many companies wish to open up their workplaces to people with disabilities. As the Nordic countries are currently experiencing an economic boom, with the threat of a

manpower shortage, it should be easier than ever to increase the level of inclusion. But the governments of the Nordic countries need to implement a series of changes and improvements to facilitate a greater level of inclusion.

Less bureaucracy, more flexible solutions and simplified lines of contact between the business sector and authorities was a repeated suggestion. Any employer currently looking to hire people with disabilities risks drowning in bureaucratic regulations. Extensive contact with various agencies is required before the forms of assistance and paperwork are finalised. Many participants concluded that if businesses are given a single agency contact who handles all the bureaucracy, there is a lot to be gained.

Another change that should be implemented is that **more focus should be placed on the capabilities and education of people with disabilities.** Competence tends to be ignored when authorities implement their various action plans, instead focusing on finding employment for the person with disabilities rather than what they can actually do. The duties offered should be suitable and meaningful.

Competency cards, which are about to be introduced in Denmark, sparked debate. The idea is that the cards will indicate the skills of a person with disabilities who is looking for work, along with their level of education. During the job application process, it shall also be made clear and established in advance which forms of support the person in question needs. As such, the employers do not have to deal with these issues. However, during the roundtable talks, criticism was levelled against this idea. One of the objections was that if it is revealed from the get-go that the job applicant is a person with disabilities, they will likely not even be called to an interview.

The focus of the inclusion initiatives in the Nordic countries was also brought up. Financial support is currently tied to single individuals, but it should be more general in nature without any individual connection and should preferably go to the employers. Large companies could be more systematically engaged, as they are in Finland, and government agencies and major employers could collaborate regarding universally designed workplaces.

The need for positive examples and knowledge about disabilities is another aspect which was brought up. Corporate leaders and executives who do not have any experience hiring people with disabilities need to learn what it can be like through workplaces with experience in this regard. More executives with personal experience

of living with disabilities are also of great interest. It would be hard to find better role models.

The business sector: Competence and concrete tools are determining factors

The Nordic business associations employ several different methods for bringing more people with disabilities into the workplace. The need to highlight good examples is viewed as important – as is cooperation between the companies in the form of networks. But the most important aspect is a reduced level of bureaucracy.

The Confederation of Danish Employers, DA, is working on opening up the labour market to people with disabilities using a two-level approach. On the macro level, they are primarily focused on moulding public opinion to influence political decision-making. On the micro level, they are looking at what the businesses can do on their own, with one method being to disseminate good examples.

“It might involve showing how a company works with bringing in people with disabilities to inspire other companies. But it is also about showing people with disabilities that it pays to look for a job,” says Maria Bille Høeg, head consultant at DA.

Concrete tools

“The economic boom means that the employment rate is high in Denmark, and that labour shortages are rising. In spite of this, there are many people with disabilities who are excluded from the labour market,” says Maria Bille Høeg.

Preparations are underway to implement a reform called competency cards, regarding which DA, the Danish Trade Union Confederation FHO and the Danish government have made joint proposals. The idea behind the cards is that people with disabilities should be entitled to more extensive support during their job application process. Each individual shall have access to a competency card which is produced in collaboration with the

municipal job centres. The competency card will display their level of education and professional experience, but also any support they may require.

“Before anyone applies for a job, there must be a decision made regarding the support. This means that employers do not have to consider this when hiring a person with disabilities. We are convinced that this approach makes things easier for both employers and people with disabilities,” says Maria Bille Høeg.

The hope is that the competency cards will help facilitate employment among people with disabilities. Studies have shown that businesses are socially engaged and wish to be more inclusive. Increased cooperation in the form of networks may be a way of facilitating this, according to Maria Bille Høeg.

“This primarily applies to people with disabilities. At the same time, other studies show that the municipal engagement is not particularly high. They are more focused on getting immigrants and young people into the labour market,” she says.

Proven methods

The Confederation of Norwegian Enterprise, NHO, is similar to DA in that it is an organisation for private companies. For the past few years, NHO has been running the project *Ringer på vannet* (“Rings on the water”). The purpose of the project is to make it easier for companies to hire people with disabilities.

“In Norway we have an expression, ‘Det trengs ikke flere 17. mai-taler’ (‘We don’t need more Constitution Day speeches’), i.e. ceremonial speeches. With this project, we want to do something more concrete and something that will cause fundamental changes,” says Ingeborg Malterud, regional manager for *Ringer på vannet* in the Oslo region.

More than 2,000 of the member companies in NHO are part of the project, but the aim is to involve even more. LO Norway, the Norwegian trade union confederation, is an important partner. The departure point is that the project is based on the employers’ needs and conditions, but also the jobseekers. They are to get the right job based on their competence.

"Receiving support from the project does not cost the companies anything, it is free of charge. The idea is to make use of the favourable economic situation while also facilitating the companies' recruitment process," says Ingeborg Malterud.

The companies involved in the project are participating in a mapping process. Everyone agrees that it is important that the right person ends up in the right position. Errors in their placement risk complicating the process. The companies hiring a person with disabilities have access to a contact person whom they can turn to.

"Companies often have questions, which can now be answered right away," says Ingeborg Malterud.

Around 2,000 people with disabilities are hired by an NHO company every year through the process employed by *Ringer på vannet*. The method has been [evaluated by researchers](#), and one way to drum up interest in the project is to disseminate information about how people with disabilities are doing once they get a job, thinks Ingeborg Malterud.

"There are so many positive stories to share."

Focus on competence, not grants

The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise, which is the Swedish private employers' business and employer organisation, prioritises the moulding of public opinion concerning the value of openness and diversity, according to senior advisor Farbod Rezania. The need for an improved job-matching on the labour market is emphasised.

"The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise survey 'Rekryteringsenkäten' (The Recruitment Survey) shows that one in five recruitment attempts fails. There is a gap between demand and supply, and this primarily affects those struggling to enter the labour market," says Farbod Rezania.

Authorities such as the Swedish Public Employment Service are focusing on the wrong things. Instead of devoting their energy towards promoting the competency of those with disabilities, efforts are directed to marketing different forms of grants and employment support.

"We want to change that. Employers first and foremost wish to know what skills the job applicant possesses, not how much financial compensation they receive," he says.

The companies are willing – but need more flexible support

Flexible solutions, openness and easy contact with the responsible authorities. These are some examples of necessary changes which must be implemented if more companies are to hire more people with disabilities, according to representatives from IKEA and Nordic Choice Hotels. Both companies have an expressed goal of hiring more people with disabilities.

Labour shortages are imminent in many sectors of the Nordic labour markets. In Sweden, the hotel sector needs to make thousands of new hires in the coming years.

“Everyone will be needed, which means that we as businesses must be open,” says Hanna Owe Carborn, people and culture manager at Nordic Choice Hotels.

The Norwegian hotel group owns hotels in more than 100 locations in northern Europe. Since its inception almost 30 years ago, the business has been built on a foundation of values seeking to contribute to society. Inclusion and diversity are part of those fundamental values.

“Having a long list of qualifications is not required to be offered a job with us. We wish to attract more people who for one reason or another have ended up outside the labour market,” says Hanna Owe Carborn.

The group is looking for cooperation with the responsible authorities in each country. Employment often starts with a traineeship period. For some, the period may be longer than for others – sometimes learning takes time. Executives are encouraged to find their own solutions and be flexible when hiring people with disabilities. An employee who was deaf could for example use a sign to show that they spoke sign language.

“It was the same kind of sign we use for different language skills. And it has proven very useful to have someone who knows sign language.”

Simpler rules entail that more businesses can contribute

There is however one issue; all the bureaucracy that companies must deal with when hiring people with disabilities and who are in need of adaptations and support.

“It is far too complicated and should be simplified. Small businesses do not have the necessary resources to manage this bureaucracy,” says Farbod Rezania, senior advisor at the Confederation of Swedish Enterprise.

According to him, there is already a fair amount of experience exchange between companies and business associations through both formal and informal networks. And this is a good way to exchange knowledge and experience. But what is even more important is for reforms to be implemented in the labour market policy and for a change to be made in the approach used by government authorities.

Hanna Owe Carborn believes that more companies would open up their workplaces if the regulations were simpler and more clear. Being able to help people excluded from the labour market is also important. There are major advantages to working with initiatives within the area of disability. She concludes that the company contributes to society and contributes to a greater level of understanding and openness among employees, while at the same time ensuring that the workforce reflects society as a whole.

“We are confident that more guests will choose our hotels as a result of our inclusion work, and I must say personally that it is amazing to work for a company that makes a real difference. I am proud of all the measures being taken at my workplace,” she says.

Supervision makes a difference, but requires resources

Like Nordic Choice, Ikea’s ambition is to hire more people with disabilities. The departure point or vision for the massive furniture group, with more than 420 stores in 50 countries, is to make everyday life better for the masses. The work with gender equality, diversity and inclusion mainly takes place through two global

projects, according to Anna Paulsson, diversity and inclusion specialist at Ikea.

“Before I came to Ikea, I worked with inclusion and diversity issues in the public sector. And the values regarding openness permeate the whole group in a manner unlike any of my previous employers,” she says.

But that does not mean there is no room for improvement at Ikea. The goal is to broaden the recruitment base and develop the workplaces to increase accessibility in Sweden. However, this work requires organisation and preparation. The work duties offered must be suitable and meaningful, and the workplaces require knowledge regarding disabilities. As part of these efforts, Ikea Sverige is participating in a project initiated and funded by the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth.

The project entails that Ikea in Sweden has been granted SEK 5 million to make supervisors available, who in turn will work with people far removed from the labour market. The supervisors, who are “regular” employees, receive training at the company but also from the Swedish Public Employment Service. They are released from their regular duties to be able to provide guidance full-time.

“Those in a supervisory role need good knowledge on how to include, treat, introduce and supervise people who might need some additional time, have various disabilities or other needs,” says Anna Paulsson.

So far, a handful of people with disabilities have found employment within Ikea Sweden through the project. However, with the right initiatives, more companies would likely look to hire people with disabilities. The problem is that the support which is available is primarily directed at individuals and not employers.

“Additional support is needed for employers and some form of bridge between the business sector, authorities and individuals. At the same time, I am a believer in cooperation, preferably through networks. When it comes to these issues, I do not see any competition between the companies whatsoever,” she says.

Focus on employers and workplaces for innovation and research

There are a significant amount of innovative projects underway and research being done to improve the labour market situation for people with disabilities. Large companies are getting involved in Finland, one Swedish project is focusing on the workplaces, and there are investigations underway in Norway to study what happens at workplaces where people with disabilities are hired.

According to Finnish statistics, there are around 65,000 people with disabilities who are currently unemployed and who wish to find a job. But entering the labour market is difficult – despite increased interest from Finnish employers to hire people with disabilities. Hopes are now centred on a project that could change the current development by offering extra support to large companies through a network.

“Companies that join this network gain access to more comprehensive information and are offered coaching. They receive a customised recruitment and support plan for people with disabilities,” says Eeva Mielonen, project manager at the Finnish National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), a research organisation within the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

With the first step, it is hoped that 100 new jobs will be created within the network.

“These are real jobs created from demand, and not manufactured jobs,” says Eeva Mielonen.

Inspiration for this approach came from the Netherlands, where large companies collaborate with the public sector to increase the rate of employment among people with disabilities. There is, however, one crucial difference between the two countries. In the Netherlands, the Government has set a concrete target for the number of people, currently far removed from the labour market, to be hired by the large companies. No such defined goals have been set in Finland.

"Despite the differences, we want to test this model of networks and coaches," says Eeva Mielonen.

Redesigning the working environment

Another method for opening up the labour markets to people with disabilities is to revise the design of the workplaces. The aim of one Swedish project is to initiate processes to create what is referred to as universally designed workplaces. According to project manager Dolores Kandelin Mogard, it all comes down to new ways of thinking.

"You could describe it as a shift in perspectives. The workplaces of today, and not least those of tomorrow, need to be organised in such a way as to make room for everyone," she says.

Dolores Kandelin Mogard works for the workers union Akademikerförbundet SSR which, together with five other actors, is running the project with project funding from the European Social Fund. The goal is to create workplaces designed to account for all the differences found in society. Focus is to be shifted from the individual to structures when designing workplaces. But in order to achieve the necessary changes, new collaborations are needed.

"Toady, measures designed to reduce social exclusion often focus on single individuals, and the work is done in what we call drainpipes," says Dolores Kandelin Mogard.

This means that different actors work independently without collaborating, and assignments handed off to authorities are not coordinated. Employers working with diversity issues often focus on a single basis for discrimination.

"A holistic approach is rarely if ever taken at workplaces, and the focus should be on people's differences being viewed as an asset," says Dolores Kandelin Mogard.

The project has produced methods and models for how universally designed workplaces should be created, with training being offered in four areas.

"The training courses focuses on different workplace aspects; the physical work environment, the social workplace, organisation and management, as well as recruitment and competence provision," says Dolores Kandelin Mogard.

Social responsibility can lead to market advantages

Within a few years, research from Norway might also provide new perspectives on how employers view the prospect of hiring people with disabilities. Camilla Stub Lundberg at the Oslo Metropolitan University is conducting in-depth interviews with executives from twelve companies.

“Research regarding how people with disabilities function on the labour market are often oriented around problems. The idea is to shift perspectives and focus on positive experiences,” she says.

More knowledge is required, she concludes. It might also be the case that companies that assume social responsibility benefit from market advantages, and these companies can demonstrate new ways of working with inclusion. The research is conducted within the scope of her doctoral thesis and is expected to be finished in three years. So far, she has completed nine interviews. During one of the interviews, an employer spoke of their positive experiences working with people with Asperger syndrome.

“Something which is emphasised is the experience of working with people completely absorbed in their assignments, and it is often described as something positive for clients and others,” she says.

Experts quoted in the report

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