

Work Organization and 'the Scandinavian Model'¹

Bjørn Gustavsen

Work Research Institute, Oslo

Comparative studies of work organization indicate that learning-oriented forms are more widely applied in the Scandinavian countries than is generally the case in Europe. This is often ascribed to the cooperation between the labour market parties and the national political authorities, and the corresponding modification of market forces through welfare and employment policies. It can be argued that this interpretation is too general. An issue like work organization is not affected by the macro-political order of society alone, but also by what more specific initiatives are taken to promote organization development at the workplace level. In this article a number of bi- and tripartite efforts to promote learning-oriented forms of work organization are presented and discussed from the perspective of the question: Is there a Scandinavian model for workplace development and what are its characteristics? It is seen that while the various efforts differ widely in terms of strategy they have some elements in common, in particular the function of building trust between management and workers on the local level.

Keywords: learning organization, networking, participation, Scandinavian model, work organization

Introduction

In surveys of work organization, the Scandinavian countries seem to have a wider application of learning-oriented forms than is generally the case in Europe (Business Decisions Ltd, 2002; Gallie, 2003; Lorenz and Valeyre, 2005). Lorenz and Valeyre see the term learning organization as corresponding to the notion of autonomy in work, as argued by the sociotechnical school in theory of organization

(e.g. Emery and Thorsrud, 1976; Davies and Cherns, 1975; van Eijnatten, 1993; cf. Lorenz and Valeyre, 2005).² As a point of departure the same definition is applied here, although with one major modification: as will appear from the later discussion, autonomy can be seen from two different perspectives: on the one hand, as a principle of job design; on the other, as a prerequisite for joint learning grounded in the need for all concerned to grant each other a certain amount of freedom to be able to build mutual trust (Gustavsen, 2006). In this context, the second perspective is applied.

In spite of most proponents of the sociotechnical school arguing that autonomy-based forms of work organization provide major advantages in terms of learning and productivity, the general tendency has been to see these forms as 'gifts' to the workers, founded on arguments like job satisfaction and democracy. Insofar as the productivity potential has been recognized, autonomous forms of work organization have been seen as one of several main alternatives in global competition with each other, and where, say, Japanese forms may be more successful (e.g. Naschold, 1993; Cole, 1993). Recently, however, this discussion has taken a new direction. Studies like Lorenz and Valeyre (2005; see also Asheim, in press) link the Scandinavian forms of work organization to the fact that these countries tend to score quite high on dimensions like employment, innovation, economic growth, income per capita and the like. In addition to establishing Scandinavian strategies for work organization development as competitive on the international scene, the link between work organization and the order of society is emphasized. Work organization may not be a question for settlement purely between management and workers on the local level but a question whose settlement is dependent on a broader context.

What is it, then, that makes the Scandinavian countries stand apart where work organization is concerned? Generally, the explanation is sought in the way in which society is organized, with a particular emphasis on the social-democratic element, or the element of coordinated market economy, as different from a pure, or liberalist, one (Lorenz and Valeyre, 2005). While a liberalist economy is driven purely by market forces as these are configured at each and every time, a coordinated economy is characterized by the market forces being modified and supplemented by agreements between the major interest groups of society. But how does this affect work organization? If learning-oriented forms of work organization generally promote, say, flexibility and innovation, why are unmodified market

forces less successful in generating such forms? Sometimes the answer is sought in the existence of active employment and welfare policies on the grounds that these provide a level of security generally lacking when the market decides all. While such factors are probably not without importance, it is still not easy to see why, for instance, the likelihood of getting a new job if the present one is lost should provide a strong motivation for learning the present job; or why unemployment and welfare benefits should motivate people to learn any job. There is reason to believe that the explanations are more complex. The purpose of this article is to explore a specific set of initiatives in this context: the initiatives that have been taken to explicitly promote learning-oriented forms of work organization between the labour market parties, and between these parties and the state. Why have these kinds of initiatives been seen as necessary and what thoughts and ideas do they represent?

The Point of Departure

The Scandinavian era in work organization was initiated in the 1960s and early 1970s through a series of research-supported so-called field experiments with autonomous work groups and related forms, first in Norway (Emery and Thorsrud, 1976), followed by parallel initiatives in Sweden (Sandberg, 1981) and Denmark (Agersnap, 1973). For a period, the issue of work organization was a hot topic, and the discussions spilled over to several other countries, with the Humanization of Work programme in Germany as one consequence (Fricke, 2000) and the establishment of the Work Research Unit at the Ministry of Employment in the UK, as another.

While the experiments gave rise to much discussion, the continued practical development was more limited and in the 1970s focus shifted from the structural properties of the learning organization to the issue of diffusion, or dissemination (Gustavsen and Hunnius, 1981). In the early 1980s, new initiatives appeared when the social partners in Sweden and Norway both made agreements on development (Gustavsen, 1985). The point behind these agreements was not to promote specific forms of work organization, but to motivate their members at workplace level to pay more attention to this issue. The ways in which these agreements were implemented, however, were to differ.

Sweden and the Major Funds

The tripartite initiatives that had provided the umbrella over the field experiments were successively dissolved and new bodies and institutions entered the scene. Central in this context was the Work Environment Fund. Under tripartite steering and with tripartite financing, this fund started out, in 1972, with the modest annual budget of SEK25 million. Over a little more than one decade, the fund grew to an annual turnover of more than half a billion kronor (about 60 million euros, according to the present exchange rate), although for a number of different purposes.

While the fund was initially intended to promote reason and rationality in working life through supporting research in workplace health and safety in a traditional sense, it was successively turned in the direction of work organization and in the direction of combining research with practical development. The core expression of the R&D intention was a series of programmes that were launched in the period from 1983 to the early 1990s (Oscarsson, 1997). The programmes were built on a standard format with a five-year duration, and with the aim of promoting a certain area, or topic. The first programme was dedicated to the issue of technology, work environment and work organization, the second to leadership, participation and organization, the third to competence, whereupon the following programmes branched off into more specific areas, such as women and men in cooperation, the occupational health services and small businesses. They were, in this sense, intended to constitute a sequence of initiatives that could eventually cover all major issues in working life. The main difference compared to the early experimental efforts was that the promotion of learning-oriented forms of organization was seen as the unravelling of a series of complex challenges rather than the establishment of one specific pattern.

When the second programme, where the main emphasis was on worker participation, was made subject to an evaluation by a German group, the following pattern emerged (Naschold, 1993): The programme proved able to reach out broadly in working life and attract altogether 178 organizations that showed an interest in relating to the programme. One hundred and forty-eight participated in at least some activity, such as a development conference. The number of organizations that created specific projects was 72; of these, significant improvements in participation emerged in 62. The number of cases where participation provided a platform for

front line development in communication, organization and technology simultaneously was only seven. Among the main reasons for this, it was suggested, was the running time at project level: the average length was two-and-a-half years, a period that was argued to be too short. In studies performed some years later, it was seen that the development had continued in some of the participating enterprises but mainly those that had formed networks with other organizations (Engelstad and Gustavsen, 1993). There is little to indicate that the pattern of the other programmes was much different.

The core learning to come out of this was first and foremost that the creation of learning-oriented forms of work organization is a demanding task. If it had been simply a question of implementing a set of design criteria, an average running time of two-and-a-half years should have been more than sufficient. It was quite obvious that the critical minimum factor was the trust-building process, where the local parties needed a step-by-step introduction and testing of the new practical order. Second, although there emerged relatively few cases of advanced development, the programme demonstrated that a programme based on an effort to engage many organizations, but with a limited input into each, *could* create major effects under the right conditions and that resource-demanding semi-experimental approaches were not absolutely necessary. The need for time had to do with trust more than knowledge. Third, since networks showed a better survival capacity than single organizations, the need to anchor the development in a more pluralist context than the single organization was emphasized. Fourth, since the pattern demonstrated by the programme was that of a 'tract' with a broad opening and a narrow end, it was obvious that it did not function within a framework constituted by a series of programmes where each implied the successive expansion of one wave of change. Had this been the case, the pattern would have been the opposite.

Successively the programmes died out, as did, by the middle 1990s, the Work Environment Fund itself, obviously for a broader range of reasons than the failure of the programmes to create cumulative effects in working life. It is, on the other hand, not unreasonable to argue that if such effects had been achieved, they may have constituted a major argument for its survival.

The next major initiative in Sweden came with the Work Life Fund. In the latter part of the 1980s, the Swedish government

levied a special anti-inflationary tax on all businesses. When the cycle turned, the government decided to plough the money back again. It was decided to do this in the form of a fund to which applications could be made for support to workplace improvement projects. Over a five-year period the Fund spent SEK10 billion on 25,000 projects, reaching about half of the total labour market. About half of the investments were spent on work organization. The core strategy was not to rely on the creation of star cases that could later be copied by others, an approach that time did not allow for anyway, but to go straight into a phase of broad change. The largest single user was ABB Sweden, for the purpose of supporting the so-called T50 programme, an effort to reduce lead time in all operations by 50 percent or more (Gustavsen et al., 1996: 42–51). Contrary to the heavy investments in new technology characterizing some of the earlier work organization efforts of Volvo (Agurèn and Edgren, 1979), ABB relied more on the options for organizational choice present in all work environments. Rather than using technology as the main driver, the T50 programme was based on a mix of mutual learning and competition between the different enterprises constituting ABB Sweden. In this sense, the T50 programme emerged as a pronounced example of an interactive and network-based approach to change (Gustavsen et al., 1991); an approach that came to acquire increased importance during the period of the Work Life Fund. Although ABB Sweden came to stand out as a major case, the nature of the case itself worked in favour of underlining the need for development across a broad front based on interaction rather than on 'models'.

In an evaluation of this Fund, based on data from 1350 of the larger projects, the most striking result was that there was a strong positive correlation between work organization and improvements in productivity as well as in health and safety. There was, furthermore, a positive relationship between the ability to change work organization and degree of participation from different categories of people – managers, supervisors, unionists, workers – in the processes that created the changes in work organization (Gustavsen et al., 1996).

While the Work Life Fund started out by supporting projects in individual organizations, inter-enterprise cooperation eventually entered the scene, but at this time it was too late to create platforms for sustainable development in terms of a number of solidly based

networks. The Work Life Fund did, however, create the rudiments of a regional organization: having to distribute SEK10 billion over a brief period of time, the Fund had to create an organization that could handle a large number of projects simultaneously. To make this possible, 24 regional offices were established that came to form the nuclei of regional coordination centres for actors interested in workplace development.

The regional offices were closed with the Fund, but some of the people and networks were taken over by the European programmes that came into use in Sweden from 1996. In the Swedish version, the so-called Objective 4 programme received applications from more than 2000 networks (Svensson et al., 2003). Relatively few of these survived, but they indicated that the traditionally quite centralized and large-corporation-focused Swedish economy was taking on a new dimension. Since then there have been a series of initiatives to strengthen networking between enterprises as well as regionalized forms of development; these two are to a large extent linked. The moving actors and forces are, however, changing (Brulin, 2002). The labour market parties have stepwise withdrawn from their traditional roles as key organizers of Swedish working life to be replaced by a more complex conglomerate of actors, including proponents of regionalization and innovation. Focus has to some extent shifted from the large corporations to regions. A region like Gnosjö has come to take on exemplary functions. Located in the southern part of the Swedish inland, this region has a tradition of entrepreneurship and networking. With a low degree of formal education, it has been able to sustain the highest level of industrial employment in Sweden until the present. One of the major moving forces is an Industrial Development Centre with local ownership and the task of organizing projects for different configurations of enterprises in the region (Eriksson, in press). In an article in the newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* (19 May 2004), the dynamic elements in the Swedish economy were presented in terms of more than 50 regional configurations called clusters, or technology blocks. It is not likely that all these configurations have a strong focus on work organization, although it is known that some of them have this focus. The point in this context is that the economic map of Sweden is changing and that there is a significant development towards regionally structured units where each unit is generally made up of a number of enterprises together with support institutions like research.

Norway and the Promotion of Local Dialogue

In Norway, the labour market parties chose a different approach to the implementation of the agreement on development. Here, a kind of measure originally called 'mapping conference' was introduced as the main one. A 'mapping conference' should, in its first version, ideally take part between actors from a single enterprise forming an inverted 'T'. This implied that all major levels should be represented, but the shop floor relatively broadly. In deciding on procedures, the first step was to reverse the characteristics of traditional negotiations: while these are conducted between representatives, in an adversarial fashion and over quantifiable objects, the workplace development conferences should have direct participation, be conducted in a non-adversarial way and include all kinds of topics. In cooperation with research, these conferences were further developed to include more criteria concerning form as well as content (Gustavsen and Engestad, 1986). A number of criteria for constructive dialogue were created, such as the need to let such dialogue emanate from given work experience rather than from topics with which many of the participants would have no experience; the need to avoid some of the participants setting the agenda for others, and more (Gustavsen, 1992: esp. 3–9, see also Gustavsen, 2001). In other words, the idea was not only to establish arenas, but to successively sharpen their design to achieve continuously more practically powerful outcomes.

Throughout the 1980s, about 450 such conferences took place. They were given a strong positive evaluation by the participants – management and workers alike – but their ability to generate more substantial practical results in the participating enterprises was nonetheless limited (Gustavsen, 1993).

In a revision of the agreement in 1990, the labour market parties decided to supplement the enterprise discourses with broader programme frameworks in the form of branch or industry programmes. These turned out to be somewhat unwieldy; the gap between using single enterprises vs whole industries as the unit of change became too large. In the mid-1990s, it was decided to turn more attention to smaller networks and to offer some research assistance to those networks that wanted such assistance. This initiative took the form of a programme in cooperation with the Research Council of Norway and Innovation Norway under the heading 'Enterprise Development 2000'; later to be replaced by the programme 'Value

Creation 2010' (broad presentations and discussions of 'Enterprise Development 2000' can be found in Gustavsen et al. [2001] and Levin [2002]).

The main idea behind introducing research as a development partner was to increase the flow of impulses into the enterprise-driven processes to make them richer in content. Such impulses could be drawn from, for instance, 'theory of organization'. What came to draw the attention of the researchers was, however, not so much to provide this kind of impulse to single organizations, as to help structure the emergent cooperation *between* enterprises. Network building raises, in itself, a large number of challenges and the inflow of knowledge and the existence of local capacity for analyses and the application of research-based development measures can improve substantially on the ability of the network actors to handle these challenges.

The drift towards more and stronger network formations has continued until the present day, although the programme framework has changed. The most successful networks – like the Raufoss light metals engineering cluster (Johnstad, in press) or the Grenland process plant cluster (Gustavsen et al., in press) – demonstrate a degree of cooperation that is so high that the future of each participating enterprise is critically dependent upon the survival of the cooperation.

These initiatives, and several other, all unfold under the umbrella of one single, bipartite programme with a limited budget. While this programme operates within the core joint area of the Confederation of Business and Industry and the Confederation of Trade Unions – largely industry – there are no organized initiatives within other parts of working life (Arnold et al., 2005).

Denmark and the Major Campaigns

Like Sweden and Norway, Denmark was, around 1970, the seat of field experiments with new forms of work organization, in particular in the engineering industry (Agersnap, 1973). There was no direct follow-up of this initiative. In the 1990s, however, several initiatives that can be seen as linked to the one from the 1970s emerged. They seem, however, to differ to some extent from the programmes emerging in the other Scandinavian countries in that they resemble

'campaigns' more than 'programmes'. Programmes, in the form of formally expressed initiatives under a definable steering structure, have also emerged, but more as a result of the campaigns than as a prerequisite for them.

A core Danish initiative from the early 1990s was initially launched by the Confederation of Trade Unions under the heading 'det udviklende arbejd'; a concept that is probably best translated into 'work as a source of development' but is commonly translated into 'developmental work' (Hvid and Møller, 2001). With roots in the history of workplace development in Scandinavia, the concept held forth a vision of work characterized by a healthy work environment with competent and autonomous employees. This vision was, furthermore, to be made real through efforts based on the organized collaboration between labour and management.

The concept came to play a major role for the union movement itself, in its arguments and other strivings for improvements in working life. Although it did not give rise to a central agreement with the employers, many employers and managers – public and private – found the concept worth pursuing within their own organization. Several existing funds provided support. One specific fund, under tripartite steering, was established, through which public money was channelled to about 200 projects.

Another initiative where the element of campaign is also strong is the initiative against monotonous work. This was a campaign that was supported jointly by the social partners and public authorities. The estimated number of 300,000 workplaces that by the early 1990s were being characterized by monotonous work was to be reduced by 50 percent by the year 2000. Some public money was made available but even here the idea was that the effects were to be reached primarily through drawing the attention of the actors in each workplace to this problem and making them do something about it. Although the 50 percent reduction may not have been reached, the initiative has had a significant impact (Hasle and Møller, 2001).

According to Lorenz and Valeyre (2005), Denmark is actually the Scandinavian country where learning-oriented forms of work organization seem to be most widespread. Until it was passed by Norway in the 1980s, largely because of the oil and gas incomes, Denmark also had the highest income per capita of the Scandinavian countries. Insofar as there is a link between organization of work and economic performance, Denmark is in many ways the core

country in Scandinavia where the economic significance of learning-oriented forms of work organization is concerned. The campaigns are only a part of the explanation for this. Among other factors, at least the following two have to be considered:

First, the cooperation between the labour market parties has traditionally had a more decentralized form than has been the case in the other Scandinavian countries. There are, for instance, a substantial number of local cooperation agreements that provide umbrellas for joint local efforts and the element of decentralization was strengthened throughout the 1990s. While central support can be important in triggering local action, a strong role for central actors can imply a need for central concerns that can slow down such a process as diffusion from a set of experimental sites. It is, consequently, possible that diffusion from the early experiments was faster and more direct in Denmark than in Sweden and Norway.

Second, the organization into industrial districts characterizes Denmark to a larger extent than any of the other Scandinavian countries. An industrial district is an agglomeration of enterprises, generally from the same industry or branch, within a territory of modest size. In an overview from 2004 (LO, 2004), 17 such districts are identified in Denmark. While some of them represent modern industries like biotechnology and robots, the majority represent more traditional sectors like furniture, fish and meat processing and engineering. Traditionally, the Danish economy has differed from, for instance, the Swedish in the sense that large corporations have been less prominent and the element of traditional sectors like food and clothing relatively more important. Investment in research-based innovation is less, but the innovation rate is still quite high (Mariussen, 2004). The reason is that many of the innovation processes in the Danish economy are based on work experience and interpretations of the market, less on research-driven processes. The industrial districts may provide a social setting conducive to the promotion of the learning organization through their network-type organization. With the growing pressure for innovation, this provides a fertile ground for the development of learning-oriented forms of work organization. This link has, however, so far not been thoroughly investigated.

Finland and the Emergence of an Integrated Innovation Policy

Among the Scandinavian countries, Finland is a latecomer in the field of work organization development in the sense that organized improvement efforts are of relatively recent origin. The main contemporary effort is a work organization programme initiated by the Ministry of Labour in cooperation with all the major parties in the labour market. The programme can be seen as a part of a governmentally based innovation policy (Arnkil et al., 2003). This policy, with roots in the crisis that followed the collapse of the Soviet trade around 1990, largely focuses on technology, but since it has been kept stable for more than a decade it has generated elements of a new economic infrastructure. When A and B are to develop technology together they can hardly avoid developing social relationships as well, and if many actors with different backgrounds are involved, these relationships will over time become many sided and span more and more sectors of working life. These developments have made it possible for the work organization programme to tap into the innovation structures, partly to help promote them, partly to draw benefits from them (Arnkil et al., 2003).

The Finnish programme is complex and with different types of projects. In the beginning, the majority of projects were based on single enterprises; successively networks have, however, come to play an increasing role. Networking is used for different purposes, ranging from cases where networking is a way of rationalizing the knowledge input to the enterprises through bringing a number of them together, to cases where networking is part of a strategy for regional development. Within the last group can be found projects where enterprises are brought to develop and promote their region together and in this context to develop social capital and specific expressions of such capital like economic partnerships and joint competence centres.

Along with this, the learning strategy of the programme has moved from seeing the use of existing knowledge – transmitted by researchers or consultants – as the main knowledge platform, to a strategy where joint learning among network actors is at the core without, however, one strategy excluding the other. In a recent presentation, the programme manager at the Ministry of Labour (Alasoini, 2006), emphasized three aspects of the programme as it emerges today.

First, its rejection of the view that the formation of learning-oriented forms of work organization is either an issue of implementing universal principles, or one of passively adapting the programme to a number of different local situations. Instead, the programme must undertake a more active, constructivist role and enter each situation from the perspective of adding something that would otherwise not have been there, but in a way that can interact with, and strengthen, certain tendencies and potentials that are present in each local context. These tendencies and potentials do, however, not always exist close to the surface and will easily escape traditional contingency thinking, a point that has given rise to the notion of 'configurational programmes' (Alasoini, 2006; Milgrom and Roberts, 1995).

Second, there is an emphasis on the learning that takes place within the framework of the projects. The ability to create learning organization is, literally speaking, a question of learning and the core element in this context is the establishment of collective 'learning spaces' (cf. Nonaka et al., 2000).

Third is a growing tendency towards anchoring the projects in networks rather than single organizations where the networks, furthermore, include more actors than the enterprise parties, in particular research and development but also, for instance, regional actors of different categories. In the phase of the program up to 2004 the number of enterprises involved in the networks is estimated at 250–300 (Alasoini, 2006). The number of projects aiming at individual enterprises was, in the same period, about 500 (Arnkil et al., 2003). Today, the total number of projects (of all kinds) is about 1000, covering more than 200,000 work places.

This programme has brought Finland to the forefront of work organization development in Europe and has helped shift the Scandinavian balance from one where the key actors were Norway and Sweden to one where it is Finland and Denmark moving into the lead.

Patterns of Change

Over the years, work organization has been seen as 'determined' by various factors. In the 1970s and early 1980s it was technology that dominated. How many texts were written at the time on 'new technology and work organization' is anybody's guess, but that the

figure was by way of reaching staggering proportions is beyond doubt. Stepwise, other determinants have taken over; of more recent origin are 'globalization', 'the knowledge economy' and for that matter the difference between a pure and a negotiated market economy. Hvid (2000) makes the point, on the basis of an overview of Danish research, that there are at best weak links between general environmental conditions of this kind and what forms of organization specific enterprises apply. This conclusion can be generalized to Scandinavia as a whole, where the belief in simple determinism has never caught on. Instead, it has, from the 1960s and the emergence of the first field experiments, been accepted that organization is subject to *choice*. Any specific external challenge can be met in different ways and the core issue is what way is chosen.

That organization is a question of choice does, however, not mean that all actors involved in settling issues of organization throughout working life are aware of making choices. This awareness is primarily dependent on the social context in which the individual actor is embedded. How, then, to create contexts that make people aware of the openness of the situation and the choices open to them?

The various efforts described in the preceding sections can be seen as initiatives geared to achieve this. At first glance, the most striking characteristic is the differences. There have been initiatives to establish and demonstrate 'models', or 'best practices', as in the early experiments, as well as initiatives to diffuse, or disseminate, the models, or practices. With the emergence of the programmes of the Work Environment Fund, new forms of work organization were seen as involving a range of different issues that all had to be faced and dealt with. The initiative launched by the labour market parties in Norway in the 1980s shifted focus from what issues need to be dealt with to the ability of the local parties to deal with them.

Whereas previous efforts saw changes of working life as a stepwise process, the Work Life Fund in Sweden added a major new dimension by aiming at changing working life as a whole within the framework of one five-year programme. The main incentive was economic support; the knowledge and capacities needed to perform the changes were thought to be present among the actors in working life, but in need of a triggering mechanism. While the Danish initiatives shared the perspective of national change, they relied less on economic support and more on the use of exemplary cases, focus-generating events and similar; in this sense they can be seen as hybrids between limited programmes and national campaigns.

With the emergence of the more recent Finnish and Norwegian workplace development programmes, there is a return to a type of initiative with a relatively strong component of knowledge generation but no longer with the establishment of exemplary cases and later diffusion processes as the major strategy. Rather, by adapting the way in which the programmes operate strongly to variable local conditions, and by localizing the development of new practices within contexts like enterprise networks and regions, the point is to make change and diffusion merge into one process.

One may imagine that the changing patterns of workplace development initiatives have to do with evaluations where the shortcomings of the various initiatives have been pointed out and improvements suggested. Most of the initiatives have, in some way or other, been subject to evaluation (e.g. Naschold, 1993; Gustavsen et al., 1996; Bakke, 2001; Arnkil et al., 2003; Arnold et al., 2005) and they have all been found to have short- and medium-term impacts although it has, of course, never been possible to say for sure that the impact could not have been better. With some exception for the Finnish programme, the evaluations have, however, never played a role of significance for new initiatives. What has happened 'next time' has been decided by other factors, such as what actors have been active in the society-level discourses on work, what challenges they have seen, what interests they have pursued and what money has been available, to mention but some of the factors.

Looking at the characteristics of the initiatives as they have appeared over time, there are, however, some lines of evolution.

While, in the beginning, much faith was placed in the enlightenment potential of exemplary cases, most of the later initiatives have in fact dealt less with exemplary cases than with the issue of how to achieve scope, magnitude, or 'critical mass' in the changes. Although such efforts differ, they are all built on the recognition that there are no simple direct lines from outstanding cases to broad change. However interesting historical cases like the Norsk Hydro fertilizer plant (Emery and Thorsrud, 1976) or the Volvo Kalmar and Uddevalla automobile assembly plants (Agurèn and Edgren, 1979; Ellegård et al., 1992) may have been, they gave rise to limited direct diffusion. Learning from such cases seemed dependent upon at least two conditions being present.

First was that those who were to learn inherently had a certain type and level of competence. Otherwise they would not be able to pick up and use the impulses. The second condition was that they

were located in social space in such a way that they could interact with the site from which they were to learn. One-time visits or presentations in texts were not enough to make new enterprises use cases of this kind. They needed continuous access, at least for a certain period of time.

The need for continuous access was actually the core element in the ABB T50 initiative. Pertaining to all the units within ABB Sweden, the point was just to use a combination of competition and mutual exchange of experience as the prime driver. In a sense, all enterprises within ABB Sweden came to constitute the unit of change together. At about the same time as the T50 case attracted attention, networks between formally independent enterprises became more broadly recognized as important in the context of change.

With the emergence of interaction between a number of enterprises as a main condition for change, the 'star cases' tended to disappear, to be replaced by more horizontal types of collaboration between partners that saw themselves as more equal in terms of what each could offer and what each needed to learn. Over the last 10 years or so, networks have come to take on continuously more significance as the arenas for the learning organization. While the national campaigns on the whole did not work contrary to the network idea, at least the Work Life Fund was of insufficient duration to radically influence the network structures in Swedish working life. More recent efforts like the Finnish and Norwegian programmes have focused on creating change in the form of growth from network-type nodes, and have had a longer time perspective. Although operating in a distributive way, the programmes are, however, lacking the resources needed to function as 'national campaigns'.

Discussion

Why have the initiatives merged? The obvious point of departure is that things do not happen by automatism or nature. The need for learning-oriented forms of work organization in combination with scientifically documented exemplary cases – be it from the domestic or the global scene – are not enough to achieve widespread change in working life. But what is it that is needed?

When learning is linked to worker autonomy, learning-oriented forms imply a risk for management. They must trust the workers to be not only competent to handle whatever challenges emerge, but also strongly motivated to do so. Learning-oriented forms imply, however, investments and risks also from the side of the workers. They need to involve themselves deeply in their work, they need to continuously acquire new knowledge and they need to face difficult decisions and associated risks. If management philosophy can change overnight, or the unions decide to fall back on a confrontational line from one day to the next, the kind of engagement and involvement needed from both sides will be lacking. This is the core of the issue of trust. The learning organization is the product of a process where it is recognized that all actors have to learn and that this, in turn, demands a certain degree of freedom in the work role. When management and workers have become involved in this kind of process, the introduction of job design principles or other elements of 'theory of organization' can be very useful. It is a mistake, however, to assume that an understanding of theoretically established criteria for job design can replace an existential recognition of mutual freedom as the platform for learning together.

While the learning organization is often seen as an issue of knowledge, in the initiatives described in this article the learning organization emerges first and foremost as an issue of trust. Trust can, of course, evolve in individual organizations. Looking at the history of work organization it is seen, however, that what emerges under one single managerial hierarchy is seldom stable. Even the highly profiled work organization developments in Volvo largely belonged to the reign of one chief executive, Gyllenhammar. If several managerial hierarchies are involved in a joint development that is, in addition, involving other actors like union representatives, public agents and more, the system of mutual checks and balances is much stronger. This is why the development of learning-oriented forms of work organization becomes more and more strongly linked to notions like networks, clusters, industrial districts and (learning) regions (Gustavsen, 2006). Obviously, formations of this kind are made for many other purposes as well, and it is far from the case that whenever a formation of this kind can be identified we can also identify an arena for the development of the learning organization. Generally, however, it is within this kind of formation that the development of the learning organization is located.

Network-type social organization draws, by necessity, a line between 'insiders and outsiders': between those that are encompassed by a specific set of relationships and those who are not. While trust has to be created 'bottom-up', through acts that demonstrate the trustworthiness of the actors involved, and can spread only through trust-based relationships multiplying themselves, there is a need for a triggering mechanism. This triggering mechanism must, in itself, be trustworthy. This is the point where the 'Scandinavian model' enters the scene. The historical evolution not only of organized parties on the employee as well as on the employer side, but the long tradition of balancing conflict against cooperation, provides the labour market parties with certain assets within the field of cooperation. The cooperation with the central political actors on employment and welfare policies strengthens these assets. They are not unlimited and the labour market parties cannot order cooperation among their members. The assets are, however, generally sufficient to initiate processes where the parties locally will have to do most of the trust building, but where there is a starting point.

The initiatives described herein are efforts, mainly from the side of the labour market parties, at converting historical legitimacy into answers to contemporary organizational challenges. They emerge from the recognition that 'the Scandinavian model' as a macro-political and macro-economic order is not in itself sufficient to generate new forms of work organization. The macro-political order functions as conditioning factors, not an ordering principle.

Since the various initiatives have unfolded over time, and in what is actually four different societies, they reflect differences in conditions and in thinking about change. Underpinning most of the efforts is, however, the need for scope, or magnitude. The labour market parties are membership organizations and equal treatment of their members is a principle to which they need to adhere. Obviously, there is no way in which central actors can create identical forms of work organization throughout working life as a whole, nor would it be reasonable to have this kind of aim. The point is to create equal possibilities, which in actual practice means that all enterprises who want to develop more learning-oriented forms of organization should have the opportunity to do so. External support should be offered in such a way that all members have equal access. When the notion of equal access is linked to the need for the process

of change itself to strengthen the trust between the actors concerned, distributive, network-oriented arenas emerge as the natural response.

The need to operate in scope and develop trust between management and workers within settings that go well beyond the individual enterprise can limit the development of 'cases of excellence', at least in the form of exceptional advances in single organizations. At the period of the most heated debate on forms of production in the automobile industry, external observers tended to argue that, for instance, the most advanced Volvo factories were inferior to, in particular, Japanese factories in the US (e.g. Adler and Cole, 1995). In addition to seeing the learning organization as a question of job design rather than a mutual guarantee of some degree of freedom for all concerned, these studies generally overlooked the point that what Scandinavian working life may lose in cases of excellence may be regained in an ability to make a substantial number of actors able to do a reasonable amount of learning in their work. Many regretted the closure of the Volvo Uddevalla plant (see, for instance, the debate in Sandberg, 1995), but it hardly affected the overall work organization development, be it in Sweden in particular, or Scandinavia in general. Economies are not made strong by a few cases of excellence if the great majority is mediocre, but by lifting the average as high as possible.

If we look for specific, more or less 'frozen' patterns of organization, be it on the macro-, meso- or micro-level, there is no 'Scandinavian model'. What can be found is a historical ability to balance cooperation against conflict and under all circumstances to keep one's word. This is the foundation for trust and the point about trust is that it can be used to create *different* forms of cooperative organization and, through this, make it possible for the actors to meet different challenges, and even the same challenge in different ways, if they are so inclined. There is only one basic condition that all forms have to meet: all actors must have a certain degree of freedom in their work role, otherwise trust is not possible. The ability to create different patterns on the same platform is actually a core condition for a learning organization; at the core of learning is change and when we talk about organizations, the ability to learn is identical to organizational change.

Notes

1. In the countries concerned – Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway – it is more common to use the concept ‘Nordic’ since ‘Scandinavia’ originally pertains to the peninsula where Sweden and Norway are located. In these days of globalization, there is, however, a need for a more distinctive concept than ‘Nordic’, and since Denmark has long ago been included in the concept of Scandinavia one may hope that the Finns will be equally tolerant.

2. Generally, the classification into different forms of work organization, as well as the assessment of their relative diffusion, raises a number of problems and the boundary between learning-oriented forms and, say, lean production, is open to dispute. However the boundary is drawn, some differences between Scandinavian patterns and European averages remain.

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Bjørn Gustavsen

is senior research fellow at the Work Research Institute in Oslo, professor emeritus at the Swedish Centre for Working Life, visiting professor at the Vestfold University College and research director for the tripartite workplace development programme 'Value Creation 2010' located at the Research Council of Norway. He has participated in workplace development programmes in a number of countries and (alone and with others) written about 25 books and 400 articles on work organization, strategies for change and the role of research in this kind of context.