



On the hunt for work of the future

Challenges for the organizing of work and for research

The above is a translation of the title of a book in Swedish

På jakt efter framtidens arbete – utmaningar i arbetets organisering och forskning

Åke Sandberg et al, Tankesmedjan Tiden, Stockholm 2016

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Abstracts of book chapters

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1. *The transformation of working life and challenges for research*, by Åke Sandberg, MBA, professor emeritus, Department of sociology, Stockholm University

We are witnessing major challenges in working life such as stress, insecurity and issues related to migration. Jobs become more loosely regulated at the same time as pressure for performance grows. Global value chains make the role for local unions difficult. The pressure from global production concepts and consultancy firms is high. Yet there is some space for action. Today several factors contribute to possibilities for a renewal of research: A new regulation concerning social and organizational work environment (rather than just psychosocial), an evaluation of work organization research by the funding agency Forte, the government's new work environment policy and a new research policy that will be presented this autumn. Work organization research, as a part of work life research, has its focus on the quality of work, on qualifications and influence, rather than how to control work. But the effects of management on work is a central issue. There is need for social science and organizational research as a supplement to the focus prevailing over recent years on the individual, on medicine and treatment.

- 1. *Blind spots in understanding society – and how to avoid them***, by Sverker Sörlin, professor of environmental history at KTH, the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm

How could social science show so little interest in understanding major contexts and transformations, for example in education, labour market, transportation infrastructure, growing inequalities. One explanation may be found by looking at the institutional order, the changing regimes, in research policy. The last two or three decades have seen a neoliberal policy with performance measures of output in line with the “audit society”, rather than political planning towards major societal challenges. But regimes change and we may now see the beginning of a new regime where “social progress” is in focus for long term research programmes covering a couple of decades and developed in a broad social dialogue involving government, authorities, civil society and popular movements. The programmes should involve long term curiosity driven research, but also active search for new and relevant models.

- 2. *Renewing Swedish leadership in worklife and employment research***, by Russel D. Lansbury, professor emeritus in work- and organization studies at the School of Business at the University of Sydney

Based on a recent evaluation of Swedish research on work organisation, undertaken by Forte, this paper argues for a new funding framework and a broader approach to research in this field. The growth of business schools and the declining role of social sciences in universities have meant that research on work organisation has been strongly influenced by managerial agendas rather than the concerns of unions and other interest groups outside business. A new national body dedicated to worklife research could bring together representatives of employers and unions as well as academic researchers to address the major issues confronting Sweden in this field. It could help to revitalise and restore Swedish leadership in the world of work and employment relations which has been absent in recent years since the demise of the National Institute for Working Life

- 3. *Research on working life in Sweden – a historical outline***, by Åke Sandberg, professor emeritus at the Department of Sociology at Stockholm University

Around the year 2000 we could see a neoliberal shift in economic and labor market policy as well as in research policy from social and problem orientation to scientific relevance. Criteria were influenced by natural science and psychology; medicine and management got a stronger role in working life. Research on working life was drastically reduced due to its close relations to practice, while research in co-operation with industry received even more resources. When it comes to financing today, the agency Forte has its focus on scientific relevance and a bias towards individuals, health and management. The priority for Vinnova is practical relevance for business development, not job quality. Schematic stages of work life research: 1940-65: Satisfaction; 65-75: Reappraisal and contradiction; 75-85: Pluralism and golden age of working life research; 1985-2007: Development dialogues in large programs; 2007- Individual and management in the service of growth. 2016 – A possibility of long term programs for work and technology?

- 4. *Future prospects for research on the organizing of work***, by Åke Sandberg, professor emeritus at the Department of Sociology at Stockholm University

A conclusion and proposal when it comes to financing of research is the reestablishment of a dedicated funding agency for work life research with a strong focus on work organization rather than on management and individuals, an agency that supports projects oriented towards relevance in research as well as in practice. Probably a completely new agency drawing its resources from Forte and Vinnova. This kind of research could be carried out at dedicated new units or very long term programmes at universities directed towards important societal challenges. There may also be a need for a unit bridging the research world and the world of workplaces. Examples of challenges are: Digitalization and work (formerly a strong part of Swedish research); industrial relations (much neglected over the last couple of decades); migration, work and organization. Who has the power to shape the work of the future (rather than, as now, avoiding issues of power)?

- 5. Do we already know all about the power over work and organization?**, by Fredrik Movitz, researcher at the Department of Sociology at Stockholm University
In Sweden, research on the power over jobs and especially representative and collective forms of worker influence has traditionally been important issues. But a later focus on globalization, individualization and IT-developments, assumptions about more knowledge intensive jobs and decreased union influence has contributed to a shift towards studies of the importance of external factors, individual influence in jobs and 'soft' forms of control. In order to develop a better understanding of contemporary Swedish working life, the author argues for the need for more research on who actually has the power to shape work in a broader sense.
- 6. It takes time to catch present times. – Reflections on research about conflicts on workplaces**, by Paula Mulinari, PhD in gender studies and lecturer in social work at Malmö University College
The overview of Swedish working life shows that there is a decline of studies in industrial relations. In this chapter the authors argues for the need of a revival of IR research from an intersectional perspective that is able to grasp the complex forms of resistance and power shaping current labour relations. Using empirical material from several different workplace conflicts the article explores different ways and strategies used by workers and argues for the need to expand the understanding of IR.
- 7. Efforts at the workplace crucial for those on sick-leave**, Opinion article by Ulf Lundberg, professor emeritus in humanistic-biological psychology, and Gunnar Aronsson, professor in work- and organizational psychology, both at the Department of psychology at Stockholm University
A systematic literature review has been performed in order to investigate the importance of different types interventions in order to help people on sick leave due to psychological and musculoskeletal disorders to return to work (RTW). The review was based on systematic meta analyses representing more than 350 randomized controlled original studies between 1995 and 2015 with about 45000 participants. The interventions involved medication, psychotherapy, physiotherapy and physical exercise, sometimes also changes at the work place. The results show that separate forms of interventions generally contribute to better health but more seldom to RTW. The most consistent finding was that interventions also including the work place were more efficient for RTW than other interventions. The scientific evidence was most convincing for musculoskeletal and combinations of musculoskeletal and psychological disorders.
- 8. What kind of support exists to improve the competence for creating good work organizations?** By John Sjöström, PhD and researcher on work environment, and Lisa Schmidt, Bachelor of Arts, social scientist and ergonomist both at IVL the Swedish Environmental Institute
On 31 March 2016, new provisions with regard to organizational and social work environment came into effect in Sweden. They clarify responsibilities of employers and emphasize the necessity of sufficient knowledge within the subject area. As follows from other parts of the regulation, the Occupational Health Service (OHS) is supposed to be the main supplier of such knowledge to workplaces, preferably based on scientific research results. However, a proportionally large part of services and support from OHS providers is aimed at individual health and treatment and much less on finding and eliminating the root causes of ill-health at work places. We argue in our chapter that one reason for this is that the research support to OHS providers derives mainly from disciplines such as medicine, psychology and public health – and to a lesser extent from disciplines studying organizations and organizing as such. We argue that there is a need for (re-)establishing relevant research on occupational and social sciences, providing applicable results that can be put to use by work places and by OHS providers.

9. *Gone with the wind? A researcher's journey*, by Wuokko Knocke, associate professor emerita, previously employed at the National Institute for Working Life

In my contribution I deplore the vanishing of the multidisciplinary National Institute of Working Life that made it possible for me as a sociologist to learn about and understand the crucial importance of the organisation of work even in low qualified jobs such as cleaning, in this case in hospitals, and the importance of wage contracts in monotonous industrial jobs for the well-being of workers. Working at the institute allowed me to shed light on the conditions of work for immigrant women who this far had never been more than figures in labourmarket statistics. Thanks to the multidisciplinary environment and what I learned there, I was able to understand their situation and give them a voice, not only as a sociologist, but as a labourmarket and worklife researcher.

10. *Action research in working life research – a road ahead?* By Tony Huzzard, professor of organization studies at the Institute of Business Administration at Lund University, and Yvonne Johansson, PhD at the School of social work at Lund University

Work in many contemporary workplaces is characterized by an increased exposure to competition, an increase in insecure work and a shift in the balance of power in the workplace to the employer's advantage. Given this background, this chapter reflects on previous attempts to change organizations with a view to empowering employees and challenging the prevailing frontiers of control through the practices of action research. Action research is an approach where practitioners and researchers can work together to improve working life. This approach has had a strong tradition in Sweden as a means of organizational renewal which need not always be on the employers' terms. In the chapter, we argue for a renewed focus on action research within working life research and foreground the need for such research to be grounded on a critical perspective.

11. *The dilemma of action research – some results based on experience*, by Lennart Svensson, professor emeritus in sociology at Linköping University

This chapter deals with different attempts to unite a developmental oriented research with a critical tradition. The critical perspective is based on values related to a sustainable society and a working life that combines different interests – the workers', the customers'/users' and the owners'. The chapter discusses different how research can be organized and funded, and the choice of different approaches and theories. The author presents his own attempts and difficulties in dealing with the dilemma in combining developmental and critical research. The time period is 35 years. The ambition is not to present a solution to the difficulties involved but to reason about different options and possibilities.

12. *Demand Shaping – a model for 'user led' Innovation which can form a Jigsaw Piece for Emancipatory Work Life Research*, by Ernst Hollander, University of Gävle

The Demand Shaping Model attacks the asymmetry in innovation thinking. By supporting workers – blue or white collar – in initiating organisational design developments work life research can contribute to empowering work organisations. Some four decades ago individual workers together with their unions, work life researchers and open-minded managers often cooperated constructively. In this way innovative organisations were built. A revival of such work life research combined with policies to recreate trust, reciprocity and balancing of asymmetries, could mean that Sweden might contribute constructively in solving the European crises.

13. When digitizing transforms work and the economy, by Åke Walldius, associate professor at the Royal Institute of Technology and Anette Andersson, PhD in human-computer interaction, working at “Unionen” a trade union, and Carola Löfstrand, specialist in issues of work environment working at the union “Vision”

This chapter describes how users through their unions can gain influence over their digital work environment. Examples are given on how union centrals and local clubs – together with representatives for employers, systems providers and researchers – can analyse and promote good examples of when digital tools and systems can renew the way they work and communicate. Thereby enhancing the economic health of the organisation and the wellbeing of the individual. We highlight the increased need for competence development and software quality initiatives against the backdrop of results from two nation wide union surveys on member satisfaction with their digital work tools. Digitalisation tend to increase work tempo and leave measures of recuperation and social support to the individual, resulting in increased negative stress. In the face of this, we argue that there is an urgent need for interdisciplinary research on how trade unions may reinvent their roles as auditors of, and advocates for, a healthy digital work environment.

14. Nordic research on working life seen from a Danish perspective, by Helge Hvid, professor in studies of working life at Roskilde University, and Sidsel Lond Grosen, lecturer in studies of working life at Roskilde University

This article presents current characteristics and developmental features of how Nordic working life researchers have studied work organizations. It is revealed how the research field comprises a tension between, pragmatism and orientation towards application, on the one hand, and critique, on the other. However, this is a productive tension which contributes to the maintenance of the identity of Nordic working life research. Furthermore, it is shown Nordic working life research contributes to practice. Based on a review of articles published in the Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies, the paper shows the themes and methods in which current working life researchers are engaged .

15. Trends in critical “Work Life Research”: The case of Australia, by Ian Hampson, associate professor of Employment Relations , and David E. Morgan, senior lecturer in Employment Relations, both at the Australian School of Business in Sydney

In Australia, neoliberalism, scientism and managerialism in universities impedes critical worklife research, although it still continues in a number of centres. With significantly fewer resources for social science university departments, the closure of industrial relations departments, and critical research centres under threat, critical research is increasingly marginalised. This emerges from key developments - Universities and Business Schools’ seeking international rankings using a dominating ‘international journal’ ranking system for ‘quality’ research output; individual academic performance management based on journal rankings; and ill-considered, ‘scientised’ and ‘medicalised’ research ethics requirements. All effectively restrict socially ‘impactful’ work life research, and present significant barriers to case-based, exploratory, and qualitative research in controversial and/or contested domains.

16. Working life research 2016 – scattered and bound to disciplines, by Lennart Sturesson, PhD in technology and social change, previously employed at the National Institute for Working Life, NIWL

Nine years after the National Institute for Working Life (NIWL, Arbetslivsinstitutet) was closed down in 2007, 111 of 173 people (64%) had disappeared from the research field working life. The average age of the researchers in NIWL was relatively high, ¼ of the researchers in 2006 are retired, and in coming four years another 35 persons will become 65 years, 10 of whom still active in the field. Remaining 62 researchers were spread to a lot of university departments in different disciplines. Especially the core of work organisation and industrial relations research have been hurt, while labour market, migration and gender research are better off. As a consequence of the loss of a research center, founding of research, international contacts, focus, and helicopter sight have been limited. To conclude: the researchers from NIWL have made it good, working life research has not.

17. *The future of working life research in a bibliometric perspective*, by Ulf Sandström, presently guest professor of scholarly studies at Örebro and Göteborg University *Swedish work organizational research was recently evaluated and the result was a mixture of both confidence and concern. Doubts about the capacity for renewal pose serious questions for the future. Sweden is a high performer in many areas of working life research.. Sweden has long occupied a prominent position in areas that may be described as traditional, but not all of these areas are given the attention one would expect. There is an indication that Swedish research is rooted in a number of formerly strong research areas but this has resulted in research being locked into areas that could be declining in importance in the longer term. Some new areas of working life research are not being covered by Swedish researchers, or at least not to the extent expected. The Swedish research portfolio is relatively concentrated and therefore risks becoming an encumbrance if and when real progress is made in new areas.*

18. *Appeal from researchers: Social sciences are weak at Forte. On the occasion of the election of a new board in Forte.* 2nd of December 2015

19. *Forte and the evaluation of Swedish research on work organization*, by Åke Sandberg, MBA, professor emeritus, Department of sociology, Stockholm University *A recent evaluation report about work organization research at Forte is presented (has a value as a partial empirical overview) and criticized. The proposal of better and long term financing is welcomed. Forte's focus on health and medicine and a narrow view of research disadvantages worklife research. The evaluations focus on the last ten years' results, neglecting the broader worklife research that was drastically cut before that period. The evaluation group has a strong bias towards the individual level; broader social research is neglected, (although there are suggestions of industrial relations research). The same is true for the board and management of Forte with a focus on medicine and health. In a separate appendix to the report a history of work organization research is presented – which is biased towards managerial perspectives and neglecting what most observers would regard as essential parts and themes of worklife research in Sweden.*

What follows are four opinion articles published in Swedish journals, and written by worklife researchers

20. *"Swedish research on working life is impoverished"*, by Ann Bergman, professor in working life science at Karlstad University, published in Dagens Arbete, April 15, 2014

21. *"The key for success"*, by Jan Ch. Karlsson, professor emeritus of sociology at the department of working life science at Karlstad University, Gerd Lindgren, professor of sociology at Karlstad University and Åke Sandberg, professor emeritus at Stockholm University, published in UNT Debatt, January 19, 2016

22. *"Misunderstandings of the Forte-report"*, by Peter Allebeck, professor in social medicine and secretary-in-chief for Forte, and Ewa Stålldal, General director of Forte, published in UNT Debatt, January 23, 2016

23. *"A radically new aim and direction is needed"*, by Jan Ch. Karlsson, Gerd Lindgren and Åke Sandberg, published in UNT Debatt, January 31 of 2016