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AFoU – a network for sustainable working life and development

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The aim of this paper is to describe and reflect on the development of the Swedish network AFoU (Workplace related R&D for sustainable working life). The overall goal with the network AFoU is to strengthen research contributing to sustainable working life, research that makes significant improvements, and future organizations characterized by competitiveness, quality and renewal through good working conditions. AFoU was started in 2015 and it consists of researchers from different disciplines, practitioners and representatives for unions and employer organizations. The network strives to combine high-quality research with practical use. This is achieved through collaboration between different stakeholders and across disciplines, thereby co-creating new knowledge that is needed to meet current and future demands.

Keywords: Workplace related R&D, Workplace development, Competitiveness, Quality, Innovation, Co-production, Knowledge, Work environment

1. Introduction

Working life is rapidly changing along with changing market and societal demands, increasing globalization as well as technology development. Although the changes in working life constitute a risk of impaired working conditions for employees, the changes will also enable increased possibilities for improvement of working conditions. In order to stay – and also to increase – competitiveness, it is important for organizations to develop their business, operations, and workplaces with skilled, healthy and motivated personnel. To achieve sustainable working life and sustainable development in organizations, there is a need to take several stakeholders' perspectives into account. Employers have a primary interest in efficiency, productivity and competitiveness, but also to create innovation and development. Employees want safe, good and equal working conditions, and opportunities for development and learning. Customers and users demand quality and reliability. In this area of potential tension, further research is needed to gain knowledge of future trends and challenges in organizations and their impact on working conditions, connections between working environment and competitiveness, and how to achieve sustainable development in organizations.

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The aim of this paper is to describe and reflect on the development of the Swedish network AFoU and its strive to strengthen research and increase knowledge for development of future attractive and sustainable workplaces in combination with sustainable development and competitiveness of organizations. The abbreviation of the network AFoU (in Swedish 'Arbetsplatsnära FoU för hållbart arbetsliv'), stands for 'Workplace related R&D for sustainable working life'.

2. Why a network for workplace related R&D for sustainable working life?

The AFoU network is a national open arena in Sweden, bringing together researchers, practitioners, labour market parties, and financiers who have the same interest in development of workplaces with actors and organizations striving for competitiveness, innovation and quality through good working conditions.

The network AFoU is a dynamic effort with the following purposes:

- to place working life research and innovation at the forefront of public and policy practice
- to increase the research arena through expanded possibilities by new research funding programmes
- to carry out workplace demand-driven R&D based on labour market parties' identified workplace challenges, knowledge gaps and future R&D needs
- to generate knowledge, which when implemented, leads to competitiveness, quality, and innovation through good working conditions
- to create new interactive collaborative activities between researchers, labour market parties, practitioners at workplaces, in research projects, industry and public organizations
- to create synergy effects by collaborating with other networks
- to contribute to design of research methodology to combine high-quality research with high relevance for practice

Other potentials for the network AFoU are that the members and member organizations constitute vital distribution channels for research results and initiation of new research. The overarching drivers and common objective defined by the AFoU network is 'Competitiveness and innovation through good working conditions'. To gain in-depth knowledge of these areas, research has to be carried out in close collaboration between practice and research in interactive forms – from problem formulation to dissemination and application of results. The network AFoU has identified eight quality criteria for research projects enabling combination of high-quality research with a high relevance for practice, see Figure 1.

- a) Interactive ways of working – Research with and for the workplace, early involvement
- b) Proactivity – The strive to prevent rather than remedy problems and poor health
- c) Collaboration with union and labour parties – Workplace driven research based on labour market parties' needs

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- d) Research in partnership – Collaboration between companies, public organizations and research, creating partnerships without bias
- e) Multidisciplinary – Different research perspectives, different workplace perspectives
- f) High degree of applicability – Solution-oriented research, low threshold for practical application
- g) Transparency during, under, and after the projects – Two or three-way communication from the beginning, dialogue, follow-up, and continuous feedback
- h) Balance between different stakeholders’ interests – Integrity, taking several perspectives from different interests into account

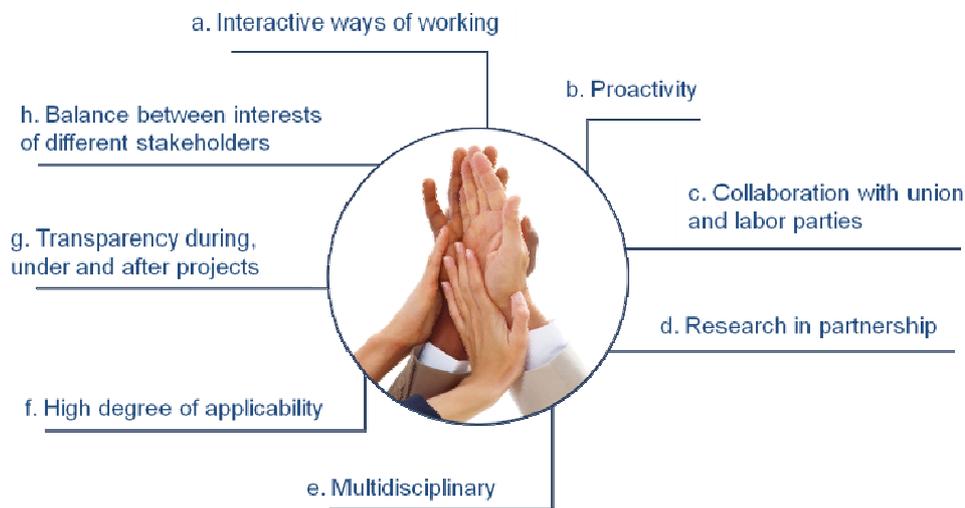


Figure 1. Quality criteria for workplace related research

3. Initiation and development of the AFoU network

3.1 Start-up, November 2014 – April 2015

The ideas behind the network AFoU were raised during discussions addressing workplace related research in Sweden combining issues related to working life, innovation, quality and competitiveness. These discussions were held during the period of November 2014 to April 2015 by researchers from HELIX VINN Excellence Centre, Linköping University, Swerea IVF, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Luleå University of Technology, University of Borås, Lund University, and the programme director and chairman of ProduktionsLyftet. The potential of development of a new national network was then highlighted.

During this period, the collaboration increased from eight to 15 members who during four meetings set the direction for the new national network, made an overall inventory of working life researchers and research organizations in Sweden, and held additional dialogues with different actors. An important issue was that this

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collaboration should 'fill a gap', specifically strive towards a 'win-win' situation, and be complementary to other networks. The former president of the labour party IF Metall, also the chairman of ProduktionsLyftet, was assigned as the chairman for the AFoU network.

3.2. Anchoring phase with labour market parties and formalization of the network AFoU, May 2015 – February 2016

The most important part in the further process was to anchor the network ideas and objectives with the main organizations of the labour market parties in Sweden. For this process, a working committee was organized including the chairman of the network AFoU, a representative from Swerea IVF and one from HELIX VINN Excellence Centre, Linköping University.

During this period, additional people from different organizations with interest in and knowledge about working life issues joined the network and became part of the AFoU steering group that held network meetings every second month. The members were highly motivated and participated in the development and start-up activities, for example:

- Development of a program description of the network ideas in public communication material, including a common vision for research, quality criteria for workplace related research, R&D project ideas, etc.
- A letter signed by the AFoU members to the Swedish government's research proposal highlighting research areas that needed to be addressed
- Development of an annual process for the network

The annual process for the network included (and still includes) an annual AFoU dialogue seminar with key actors from main organizations of the Swedish labour market parties, research funding organizations, etc. The process also includes an annual loop to identify the needs prioritized by the labour market parties, practitioners, and workplaces in different sectors. Key issues are then followed up in network workshops, in which initiatives are taken to new activities.

The first AFoU dialogue seminar was held in October 2015 hosted by Svenskt Näringsliv. It was an important milestone as the main organizations for the labour parties in Sweden (LO, Svenskt Näringsliv, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, Saco, TCO and the Swedish Agency for Government Employers) at this seminar committed to appoint representatives for a reference group for the network AFoU.

The strategic dialogue resulted in identification of future development needs of research related to future work and workplaces. These were followed up and processed in an operational network workshop in November 2015.

During this period, the network AFoU increased from 16 to 50 members, representing 18 organizations.

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3.3. Growth and future development of the network, from March 2016 and onward

The organization of the network AFoU includes a reference group, a steering group, and a working committee. The AFoU reference group has representatives from the main organizations of the labour market parties. There are four to six meetings per year with rolling hosts. At the meetings, needs are identified and prioritizations are made for the network activities and development.

The AFoU steering group plans and develops activities based on the reference group's priorities. At each meeting there are rolling research presentations and rolling responsibilities for practical issues. The AFoU working committee carries out the strategic and coordinating work where the AFoU chairman, HELIX Competence Centre¹ at Linköping University, and Swerea IVF are represented.

The network has at present limited public funding, why each member invests in his/her own engagement. The operational work in the working committee is funded by Swerea IVF's strategic programme – 'Industrial work environment/ Sustainability' during 2015 – 2017 and by HELIX Competence Centre during 2016 – 2020.

Several network activities have taken place or are planned for during this phase, for example:

- Dialogue seminars
- Network meetings
- Creation of collaboration teams for spinoff activities, new R&D projects, etc.
- Development of a project portfolio, an inspiration folder visualizing different research projects and their results, which are relevant for practitioners
- Updated communication material
- Contribution to research funding calls and governmental investigation regarding working life research
- Dialogue with the Labour Ministry
- R&D collaboration activities with the platform Sustainable Work (2017)
- Public web and member working platform on the web (Swerea, 2017)

During this period, the network AFoU has increased from 50 to approximately 120 members, representing over 30 organizations (spring 2017).

4. Results – identified research needs and approach

Since 2015, the number of members in AFoU has increased continuously. One current strive is to reach a balance between representatives from different sectors, members working in private companies and public organizations, union representatives and researchers.

A number of research areas have been identified for the network, areas where there is a current need for further research about consequences for working life:

- Globalization
- Digitalization and automation
- Continuous improvements and change processes

¹ HELIX VINN Excellence was restarted and renamed in 2017 (Berglund et al., 2017).

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- New organization structures, outsourcing and privatization
- Psychosocial issues, stress and leadership
- Diversity and inclusion
- Competence supply and learning

For all research areas above, it is important to also have an international perspective as well as focus on how research results can be applied in practice. The latter is strived for by having an approach of co-producing knowledge in an interactive approach between research and practitioners. It involves knowledge development in two systems, the research system and the practice system, both resulting in new valuable knowledge. Co-production requires a systematic contact between the two loops of knowledge production, see Figure 2.

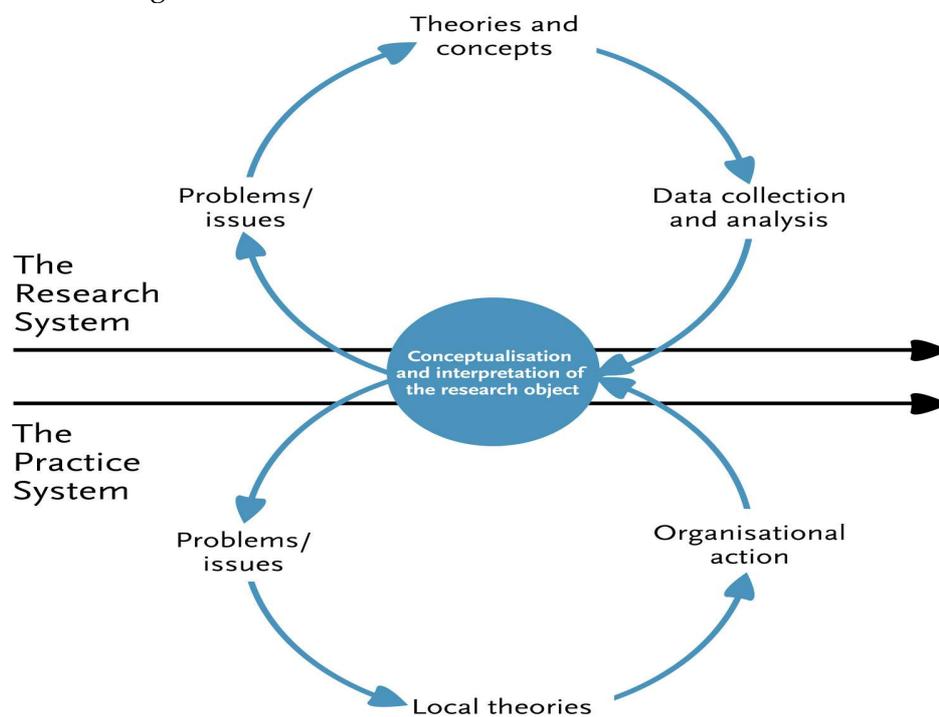


Figure 2. Co-production of knowledge through collaboration between researchers and practitioners (Svensson et al., 2015)

So far, AFoU has resulted in new cross-collaboration between research fields and sectors through different activities, such as dialogue seminars and workshops with different topics. Examples of topics have been ‘digitalization’ and ‘diversity in working life’. Work groups have also been formed as a result of the network meetings, groups that collaborate in research and/or making new research proposals. Furthermore, an initiative has been taken to create synergy effects by collaborating in new ways between existing projects. This network-collaboration model is applied within the theme of ‘Smart improvement work’, where four research projects have identified potential advantages of collaborating with each other and organized a first joint workshop to learn from each other as well as initiate new common activities to fill knowledge gaps in further research.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The basic idea in AFoU is research characterized by co-production of knowledge and synergy effects through collaboration in the AFoU network. This includes collaboration between individual network members and research projects. Individual projects contribute with valuable results, but collaboration between projects and actors can create much more. AFoU may here constitute a platform to create synergies and concrete collaboration to gear up the possibility to reach out with results and make greater impact.

The AFoU-network is an open arena for collaboration between different actors – researchers, practitioners (industries, public organizations), labour market parties, financiers, including collaboration within and between projects and other networks. Current efforts for further development of AFoU include how to involve intermediaries to reach more practitioners and strengthen the AFoU initiative. Other ongoing work is to fully implement and evaluate the developed network-collaboration model for synergy effects. There are also a number of questions related to how to ensure practical benefits of workplace related R&D. These questions guide the forthcoming development of AFoU:

- How are R&D problems formulated in collaboration with the problem owners?
- How can the interactive processes in workplace related R&D be further developed?
- What prerequisites are needed to make workplaces ready for workplace related R&D?
- How can results from workplace related R&D be more available and 'user friendly'?
- How can quality of workplace related R&D be assessed so that also implementation is prioritized?
- How can different sectors and branches learn from each other?
- How can different stakeholders' interests be taken into account through collaboration instead of conflict?

In a future state, the network AFoU may play an important role in identifying trends and challenges by creating and developing regional and national workplace fora. The network may broaden and deepen workplace related research with continuity and strength, no matter targeted appropriations and investments. AFoU has the potential to constitute a bridge for adaptation, development and innovation in working life. By that it can contribute to fill an identified gap between research, development and implementation in working life research in Sweden (Abrahamsson, 2017).

Through a national effort and collaboration within the network AFoU, new opportunities may be created for: identification of problems and obstacles at workplaces and translation into future research areas; finding solutions that create value for all stakeholders; long-term and sustainable strategic development; co-operation at a local, regional, and national level; and making knowledge about workplace related R&D available.

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