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**TEAMWORK IN SOME SWEDISH STATE AND MUNICIPAL
ADMINISTRATIVE AND CARE OCCUPATIONS: AN
EVALUATION FROM THE POINT OF VIEW TO THE QUALITY
OF WORKING LIFE OF EMPLOYEES***

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Teamwork was introduced to considerable parts of the Swedish public sectors, more so in the care-work sector but also in some administrative and clerical sectors. The reasons for this were diverse, such as the wish to de-concentrate the huge bureaucracy of the capital city and transfer some of it to the provinces; the desire to bring city government and services nearer to the citizen by the establishment of decentralized wards; the intention to prevent on the one hand the isolation of the provider of home care and on the other the over-institutionalization of the services for the old as well as for pre-school children, i.e. to keep the elderly at home for as long as possible, and small children in small home-like environments: the recognition of the need to upgrade the training of the thousands of mainly young women entering the child care and geriatric care occupations, as well as to upgrade their low prestige: and especially the political aim of overcoming the traditional hierarchic structure of public work organizations which perpetuates both undesirable class-distance and absence of autonomy and initiative of rank and file employees. The contribution of teamwork to the

enhancement of the quality of working life of the employees in a few work organizations of the Swedish public sector is examined by considering three characteristics: the degree of the improved quality of the task, the improved autonomy of the worker, and the improved social support at work. All purposes mentioned above are obviously involved in each of these three characteristics. The conclusions drawn are that success is best insured when workers participate in the design and planning of reforms, when their tasks and responsibilities are broadened, and when continuing growth is possible, recognized and rewarded.

The majority of attempts at improving the quality of working life have taken place in industrial organizations. In recent years clerical work in industry and in the banking and insurance industries have also been included in such reform efforts. Most of these reform projects have been socio-technical in nature, using the introduction of new technology as a lever for organizational changes aimed at improvement of the quality of working life. The great majority of socio-technical projects have used teamwork as a central organizational instrument.

Even before the advent of computerization it was observed that many negative characteristics of factory work had been transferred to white-collar work, such as fragmentation, extreme specialization and very rapid pace of work. It was assumed that this process of deskilling and degradation of white-collar work had been accelerated by office mechanization, and even more so by computerization. Computerization currently has a large impact on the characteristics of jobs in the banking, insurance, travel agencies and other communication and information industries, (whether public or private), yet its impact on much of other lower administrative work in state regional and municipal authorities is limited, and it does not affect at all the work of

the direct care provider in the public services to children, the elderly and the handicapped. Work in the four Swedish organizations which I shall describe, namely, the Ministry of Immigration Office, one town's department of planning and housing and two care organizations - one municipal district organization providing care for the elderly and one district organization of Stockholm's municipality day-care services for pre-school children never the less bad, a number of unattractive characteristics; all were not caused by high mechanization or by computerization. Of all four, only the immigration office had many of its clerical procedures computerized, and this at the beginning of the organizational reform.

In that office the chief unattractive characteristic of the work of dealing with the applications of immigrants and their families for permits and so on, was fragmentation, boredom, low status and lack of any decision-making authority. The town-planning office clerical jobs were certainly less attractive than the technical or the professional ones, and for similar reasons. As to the care organizations, the problems of care workers were especially low status, low pay, and loneliness, especially for those giving care services to the elderly in their houses or providing day care for infants in their own homes (day parents). The special problems of care occupations of being in constant touch with dependent people have only recently been recognized as major causes of stress.

What moved the heads of these organizations to change to team work, thus limiting hierarchy drastically in the units affected - there is now only one level of management above the team, - was not mainly the desire to improve the quality of working life and thus not mainly the desire to abolish the negative characteristics described above. All four projects were part of the Swedish dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their welfare state in the

1970's: they were dissatisfied with the heavy concentration of a constantly growing bureaucracy, especially in the capital and wished to revitalize the, provinces; they were dissatisfied with the stiff hierarchical relations within government offices and social services and wished to democratize the public work place; they were dissatisfied with the distance between administration and citizen and the depersonalization of social services, especially given the increasing dependence of the elderly and small children in large impersonal institutions due to the growing percentage of elderly people in the population at large and the growing percentage of mothers of young children in the labour force and the commitment of the state to publicly assisted day care, and they looked for a way to develop more humane and better quality services for the old and the young. Thus de-concentration, democratization and humanization were the chief paroles of the reform. The improved quality of working life of part of the public employees was a by-product of these reforms. We should not however overlook the fact that some professional administrators and social science consultants were more concerned with the quality of working life of rank-and-file employees, and they were intelligently using the wave of reform in the public service to that end, sometimes in order to establish and diffuse successful results of small previous experiments. They, as well as some of the politicians were influenced by the successful example of the Norwegian experiments in "autonomous work groups" and their implementation in parts of Swedish industry. It is therefore no surprise that all four projects discussed chose: to reform by way of instituting teams of employees.

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the reforms as improvements of the quality of the working life of the employees affected by them. I shall do so by presenting the information obtained by administering a

questionnaire in individual interviews with ten employees from each of the four organizations mentioned, the national immigration office, a town planning and housing office, a care for the elderly centre and a child day-care district. I shall describe details of my analysis of the questionnaires soon. The idea was to assess the improvement in the quality of working life there, or its absence, by comparing the evaluations of the interviewees with those of the national average for their occupational groups. The task turned out to be rather problematic, as I shall soon explain. I also asked those interviewees who could evaluate the change because they had performed similar work under conventional conditions, to supply me with their positive or negative evaluation of the changes of 17 characteristics of their work, which are supposed to be affected by such reforms. Of the 40 interviewees 29 were able to do so. After presenting the analysis of the employees' evaluation of their jobs and of their evaluations of the effects of the reform I shall attempt to explain the different levels of success or failure of the four projects, by correlating them with the information obtained from four in-depth interviews of a few hours each which I have conducted with four groups of key persons in the four organizations. I will correlate the results of the degrees of success with information thus obtained concerning the role of the teams within the organization, their structures and functions, the degree of participation of the employees themselves in the change process, and, finally, the initial goals and current evaluation of results presented to me by the key persons.

Let me begin, then, with my comparison of the assessment of the evaluation by my interviewees of a large number - thirty one - of characteristics of their jobs with the evaluations given by the national sample of the same occupational group.

As the same questions which I put before my interviewees had been used in a survey conducted by the Swedish Public Opinion Institute for *Jobs in the 80's*, an international study of jobs and work-values, and as that survey studied a representative sample of the Swedish employed population, I could compare my results with the national average as well as with the national average of the occupational groups to which my samples belong. The Swedish Public Opinion Institute - SIFO for short - has, however, divided the working population only rather crudely into blue-collar workers and white-collar employees. At my request they also reworked from their data the category of care workers, which for them includes- also some blue-collar workers, whereas in my sample all care workers happen to be salaried employees. All three groups can be subdivided by educational levels, namely low or grade school only, medium or high school and high or post-secondary education. The comparison, then, which I shall offer between my sample and the national sample, is based on two out of three occupational groups (white collar employees in general and care workers) as well as on educational level. Nevertheless the comparison is far from perfect, both because of the overlap of occupational groups in the SIFO tables and because of the disregard for pay, skill and training levels in both studies. Thus, for example all the employees in the unit in the immigration office, which was studied, were in the lowest of the department's salary levels, and the care workers who care for the elderly in my sample are paid less than male unskilled blue-collar workers. These facts exhibit a clearly significant bias, which I cannot correct. The bias, however, as it happens, is in both cases towards the lowest levels of both status and pay within the salaried employees category. Hence, the bias is against, not in favour of my finding that on the whole the ventures were successful. The relatively high quality of

the jobs of the immigration office employees and of the care for the elderly workers is, therefore, of a higher significance than the one apparent from the comparison which I am going to present.

I have examined 31 statements elicited from each interviewee regarding positive characteristics of their job (the choice of response was usually from these: applies to my job; applies to my job partly; and, does not apply - except for some significant questions for which a finer scale of four degrees was offered, such as four degrees of involvement in decision making or even eleven degrees of opportunity to use one's skills and experience on one's job). I have divided these 31 statements into 5 clusters: the content of the current job: its prestige; social relations and social support on the job; the absence of stressors; discretion and participation. I have omitted both pay and promotion items, since they are usually not supposed to be relevant directly to the reform of the quality of working life despite my personal misgivings as to this supposition (I think were pay and chances for promotion improved as part of the reform, it would greatly improve the quality of working life, especially of groups which are disadvantaged, as two of the four here studied).

To begin with content, which is a list of responses to eleven questions. When comparing the average level of the responses I obtained to these questions with the national average of their occupational group (white collar or care work) and with the same level of schooling, then a great difference appears between the results thus obtained for the two administrative groups and the two care groups I have studied. The evaluation of one's own job as far as content was concerned, as given by the administrative workers, was by far lower than that given by the care workers, and in two ways. First, they were, on the whole, less favourable than the others, and second, they were

on most items lower or equal to the national comparable group, whereas the others were higher. Only on one item, namely the degree of variety of one's work, were the immigration department workers higher than their peers, and only on two, namely their work being creative and their having opportunity to learn on the job, were the town-planning and building department workers higher than their peers. The town-planning and building department workers equalled their peers on four more items, namely, the availability of proper tools, the job not demanding any improper or immoral conduct, the degree of variety of the tasks on the job, and the opportunity to use one's skills and experience on the job. On three more items they were scarcely below their peers: their job being interesting, their job offering them the opportunity to develop their abilities and their being useful and productive on the job. The town-planning and building department workers' responses were definitely lower by comparison regarding only two items of the content of the job: the opportunity to perform quality work and of one's contribution being recognized. As to the immigration department workers, on all ten remaining items, namely on all with the exception of variety, their responses are significantly lower by comparison with their peers.

As to the content of the work of the care workers, the care for the elderly workers' responses were higher by comparison for 6 out of the 11 questions, and the day care workers' for 8 out of the 11. They were definitely lower by comparison on 3 questions and on only 1 question respectively. Both evaluated the degree of variety on the job below their peers, and the care for the elderly workers did the same also regarding the opportunity to learn on the job.

As to the prestige of work and the work place, I have included it, since one of the negative characteristics of all four kinds of work here studied is

just the low prestige usually publicly associated with them. I wanted to see if there was any improvement concerning this characteristic as a result of the reform. There were four items inquired about: regarding the work its being important, and its being of service to the community; regarding the workplace, whether it has a good reputation and whether one is proud to be working there. The immigration department workers scored higher by comparison to their peers on one item: they deemed their work important. The town planning and building department workers scored on two: they deem their job of service to their community and they are proud to work there. The care workers scored higher on three items, on the importance of their work, on its being of service to their community, and on their pride. The immigration office workers scored significantly lower than their peers, and surprisingly so: they were not at all proud of their work, and apparently because the provincial population in their town looked down on immigrants or did not consider service to immigrants of value. The town planning and building department workers as well as the care for the elderly workers considered the reputation of their work place lower than their peer group.

As to social relations and support on the job, the overall picture here, as one might very well expect, was much brighter than the national average. The four questions in this cluster concern one's being valued as an individual, one's good relations with one's superior, one's esteem for one's workmates and the level of cooperation on the job. The care groups scored higher than their peers on all four items. The two administrative groups scored higher on the two last items. The immigration office workers scored significantly lower than their peers on the first two items and the town-planning and housing department workers on the first.

The fourth cluster, the absence of stressors, comprises three items: the absence of dirt and noise on the job, of physical strain and of rush and stress. My results here are least satisfactory, because here the comparison of the group of workers who care for the elderly with the national care occupations is highly inadequate, since direct care for infirm elderly involves both dirt and physical effort. In order to obtain accurate results comparison should be made with the national average of care-workers who care for the elderly, not with the national average of care workers in general. With this reservation in mind, let me observe that the picture is brighter here for the administrative workers than for the care workers. Both the immigration office workers and the town planning and housing office workers report less dirt and noise and less physical strain than their peers among the white-collar group. This is all the more remarkable in view of the physical strain usually caused by the computer terminals, which are used by all the immigration office workers. The care for the elderly report more of these two kinds of stressors than their peers. The most important item here is the reported feeling of being rushed and under stress. Here both the immigration office workers and the care for the elderly workers are worse off than their peers, yet the day-care workers, whose work is generally considered very stressful in conventional workplaces, here assess their condition more favourably than their peers.

The fifth and last and most significant cluster of characteristics is that of autonomy and participation, and it comprises responses to nine questions. They concern questions of autonomy - one's opportunity to work without interference, the degree of autonomy in one's planning of one's own work, the flexibility of one's work hours - and of participation - one's say regarding important decisions that have impact on one's job, one's being informed about the affairs of the work place, the degree it of one's participation in the

decision process in the work place, whether one is consulted regarding changes, whether one's consent for them is required and whether the union's consent is required. Of the nine points the immigration office workers score higher than their peers regarding four and lower than their peers regarding five; with the town-planning and housing office workers the results were 6 higher and 2 lower: for both care worker groups the results were 7 higher and 1 lower. There are three items on which all four groups score higher than their peers: they concern the autonomy in planning one's own work, the degree of one's participation in decision making and the fact that union consent for implementing significant changes at work was required.

I now come to the responses of the 29 out of the 40 interviewees concerning their evaluation of the changes. I should observe first that my results are not necessarily representative for the day-care workers, since only 3 out of the 10 in my sample could respond on this issue, most of the others being young women on their first job in a workplace in which teamwork is well-established. Of course, here I do not have the advantage of comparison with the results of reforms in other public work organizations since the results of teamwork reform have not been surveyed by SIFO, nor systematically by any other group.

The interviewees were asked 17 questions. They were asked to choose concerning 13 items whether they saw definite improvement, some improvement, no change, or deterioration regarding them. Concerning 4 other items they were asked whether they saw definite deterioration, some deterioration, no change or improvement. Let me first report on these. These last 4 reflect criticism of teamwork found in the recent literature in the sociology and psychology of work, where 4 negative side effects are claimed to have been observed. These 4 negative side effects are: the increase in the

sense of stress; the excessive dependence on workmates to the extent that one's sense of autonomy and of individual responsibility is noticeably limited; the paradoxical but still possible increase of the sense of isolation; and, finally, the loss of workers solidarity in the sense that workers allegedly lose the positive sense of "us" against "them" - meaning workers against management. My data show quite conclusively that the two last and paradoxical side effects are utterly and completely absent. Among the 29 individuals asked very few - 3 or 4 - gave very faint assent to them. As to the first two side-effects, the increased sense of stress and of dependence on workmates, half of the members of the administrative groups claimed some increase in the sense of stress, while less than 40 per cent of the care for the elderly workers and none of the day-care workers agreed. Only one person claimed a decline of stress, which shows that sense of stress is, indeed, quite problematic. I shall return to this point later. As to a sense of excessive dependence on one's workmates, it is also problematic, though significantly so only among workers who care for the elderly.

As to the 13 questions concerning possible improvements, 7 of these, concern the content of the job, 4 concern autonomy or discretion and 2 concern social support. First as to the content of their jobs, most interviewees report definite improvement. Though as we have seen above - the immigration office workers evaluate the current content less favourably than the town planning and housing office workers, they report greater improvement due to teamwork. The increase of variety (1) scores highest quite generally. The increase of one's ability to learn new skills (2), scores very high among the immigration office workers and care for the elderly workers. So does the increase in the interest in one's work (3), and of one's work having become more responsible (4). In sum, only in five cases out of

the 7 x 4 was there a report on the degree of improvement below 50 percent of the maximum that the questionnaire permitted to score - the increased ability to use one's skill and experience (5) among day-care workers, the improved challenge of one's work (6) among town planning and housing department workers and among care for the elderly workers, one's work having become more responsible (7), and the quality of one's work having improved (7) for the town planning and housing department workers. I will discuss the peculiarities of this group later. Second, as to the 4 questions concerning autonomy, again the immigration office workers, whose view of the degree of the current autonomy of their own work is most critical, are nevertheless those who value the improvement due to teamwork most. Improved availability of information regarding the workplace (1) is recorded as high by the immigration office workers and by care of the elderly workers, but only by one third of the town planning and housing department workers and the day-care workers. More autonomy in the planning of one's work (2) is, again, evaluated highly by the immigration office workers and by the care for the elderly workers, but also significantly by the town planning and housing department workers. Improved control over the pace of one's work (3) is reported &5 significant by the immigration office workers and by the day-care workers. The increase in flexibility of one's work hours (4) 15 reported as extremely high among the care for the elderly workers and Significantly by the immigration office workers and the day-care workers.

The remaining two questions concern social relations and social support. A very high level of improvement is reported here by the care for the elderly workers regarding both support for workmates (1) and good relations with management (2). The day-care workers come next with a

significant improvement of support from workmates and a high improvement of relations with management reported. The immigration office workers report significant improvement of support from workmates but hardly any change in the quality of relations with management. The town planning and housing department workers are split on both issues and, to repeat, I will discuss them separately.

The sum total of the assessment of improvement of content, characteristics is highly favourable for the immigration office workers and care of the elderly workers and significant for the day care workers, the town planning and housing office workers scored the lowest - 57 percent of the possible maximum improvement allowed by the questionnaire. The sum total of the assessment of increase in autonomy is extremely favourable for the immigration office workers, next highest for the care of the elderly workers and still as high as 65 percent of the possible score for the town planning and housing office. Only the day-care workers report a small increase in autonomy. The sum total of the assessment of improvement of social relations and support is an extremely high score of the two care groups, whereas the two administrative groups only reach the 50 per cent mark of possible improvement.

I shall now attempt to explain the differences and peculiarities in the employees' evaluations of the current level of the quality of their jobs as well as their evaluation of the outcome of the reform by the institution of teamwork. I shall rely for my information on in-depth semi-structured interviews of a few hours each with key persons in each of the four organizations studied.

There are a few side data that seem to be significant contributors to success. First, the presence of a clear image of the desirable form of working

life shared by management and all groups of employees affected. Second, a high degree of employee participation in design, planning and implementation of reforms meant to bring this image into reality. Third, a plan for broadening the tasks and responsibilities of workers, and the prevention of a blockage of the possibility of further broadening. Fourth, upgrading of both pay and rank of employees commensurate with the increase of their skills and responsibilities. Of course, an important desideratum making the ones just listed possible is the diffusion of the reform throughout the work organization - mostly or totally.

To begin with the image of the quality of working life. From the viewpoint of this desideratum all four organizations here studied have implemented plans which are defective. As mentioned earlier in all of them the improvement of the quality of working life of the employees was a sort of an afterthought. Only in the immigration department office were the alleviation of fragmentation and boredom of work included in the purpose of the initial reform. This explains why in none of the four projects was there a plan for the reduction of stress in work. (In several Swedish work organizations the stress factors of given tasks have been pinpointed and thus could be reduced or even eliminated). In general there was no systematic thought in any of the four projects have studied about the possible restructuring or redesign of the jobs and of the work-roles affected, not to mention the restructuring of the entire work organization.

Next comes the desideratum of involving workers in the design, planning and implementation of the reform. This has happened, among the four projects studied, only in the immigration department, where in the earliest stages of the change process, in the years 1972-1973, a working group, which included representatives of the workers and their union, was

established. The outcome of this was a positive attitude towards the change fostered by both employees and union. They agreed to the abolition of the typing pool and to the computerization of all registration work.

Unfortunately, at this early stage it was assumed that there was no choice as to which computer system to install and how to use it; in the last decade the choice of the appropriate computer system most favourable for the improvement and the enrichment of clerical jobs has become one of the most potent instruments of progress, especially when the choice is effected through the full participation of middle management and employees with the aid and cooperation of a computer specialist. At that time this knowledge was not yet available. The immigration department thus missed an opportunity for a thoroughgoing socio-technical reform. Yet the later union demands, on health grounds alone, to limit the time an employee may spend at a computer terminal, and the arrangements implemented in order to comply with this demand, comprise an instrument for maintaining a degree of a variety of tasks and rotation within each team. Much of the advantage of the workers' participation in the planning of the reform was lost, as it happens, due to the fact that as the office moved from Stockholm to Norrköping in 1976 all the old rank and file employees left and now local employees took their place. The working out rather empirically of the advantages of teamwork was done to some extent in the planning of the reform of the care work for the elderly in Torero municipal administration; simply because before the official start of the reform one team had already been in existence for four years and its experience was utilized - especially in the attempt to overcome the resistance of different groups of care workers who: were afraid to lose their minimally higher status and better conditions as compared to those of shift workers and of the lowest-status aids.

The relatively low level of sense of achievement of the town planning and housing employees appears to me to be mainly due to the utter absence of any participation of either management or employees in the planning of the reform, which was instituted by a decree from above. Thus, the different levels of qualifications and the diverging interests of the professionals from the clerical and technical staff was never taken into account and has developed into a pronounced polarization of attitudes to teamwork.

We now come to the desideratum of broadening the tasks and responsibilities of the members of the teams. In the case of the immigration office, the initial growth of the tasks was blocked by the resistance of the permit board to participate in the reform of the registration and application units, thus restricting the latter teams to the right to decide only regarding the simplest of cases. Each team in that office was apportioned, upon the implementation of the reform, a geographical area of immigrants so as to integrate services to them, according to their specific circumstances and problems. This demanded from team members to familiarize them-selves with the entire range of responsibilities of the whole team, thus broadening their tasks and responsibilities. But, due to the refusal of the permit board to share its responsibilities with others by integrating into the teamwork reform a barrier to further growth was raised. Agitation for reform in other units does continue, however, so that barriers may soon be lowered. In the town planning and housing department, where the professionals - architects and engineers - were forced to team up with clerical and technical workers to handle geographically divided team tasks, the professionals have no sense of growth and resent the loss of previous support of and cooperation with specialists of their own kind whereas the clerical and technical employees have a sense of growth. This is a very problematic barrier to be overcome.

As to the care for the elderly teams, the long promised systematic and extensive training for all, leading to more responsibility and to a clearer future career ladder, was cancelled due to budgetary cuts, thus causing some disillusionment and frustration. It is due to take place next year.

Finally, upgrading of pay and rank commensurable with workers' increased skill and responsibilities. Failure to comply with this desideratum leads to frustration. This is the case in two out of the four projects under study: the immigration office and the Orebro department for the care of the elderly. This frustration is expressed, as we saw, in the responses to some questions concerning the prestige of the respondents' workplace.

In conclusion, the Swedish experiment in the improvement of the quality of unattractive lower rank administrative and direct care work by instituting teamwork in four public work organizations on the whole appears as very encouraging. Autonomy and social support have definitely been improved in all four organizations. The content of the care workers jobs is definitely improved in comparison with other care workers. Above all there are clear indications for many further improvements and their implementation. Its lessons are applicable to similar work in Sweden as well as elsewhere.