

Far-fetched approach? What has systematic learning got to do with retaining older workers?

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This paper addresses the challenges of implementing a system of organizational learning within a large nursing home in Oslo. The paper will discuss and relate starting points, processes, learning activities and results in a project financed by SSP, and the Norwegian National Initiative for senior workers 2001-2005.

Basing itself in the perceived results from prolonged learning processes among people having worked for many years with adapting and adjusting workplaces to make it possible for senior workers to continue working, the current project chose a broad approach in a project initiated in the fall of 2002. The broad approach was based in experiences of how initiatives targeted towards special needs of older workers, usually had to expand their perspectives considerably to include many age groups, and many different aspects of the workplace environment.

The broadness in the design of this project aimed at building general learning capacities in the chosen organisation, according to models developed at WRI, both in order to be able to engage the workers themselves in identifying more focused initiatives, and in order to build participatory structures. While projects starting from a narrow and specialized focus, will probably have to broaden their perspectives to succeed, projects starting broadly are in danger of losing their focus. The paper will discuss challenges and dilemmas in implementing this broad approach, summarizing experiences of various learning activities that have taken place in the nursing home.

Building general learning capacities included establishing and developing a system of meeting places that connected people from different departments, on different levels and in different functions at the nursing home. The purpose of the system was to enhance the working- and learning conditions in the different departments and in the nursing home as a whole, in order to attract new workers and to motivate all employees to stay.

The meeting places were considered to be part of the overall learning activities in the nursing home and were supposed to act as an integral part of the communication systems in this organization and build down differences between groups of employees, motivating and challenging their way of thinking about and carrying out their work tasks. The presupposition was basically that the workers would benefit from this way of problem solving and cooperation, through

- 1) Systematic dialog and reflection on
 - a. the content and execution of work tasks and
 - b. possible steps / actions that could prevent early retirement
 - c. possible steps / actions that could prevent absence due to illness
- 2) implementing / or improving the routines of work
- 3) gaining more control over work tasks
- 4) developing a higher sense of mastery in the everyday work