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A testing time for Director of Denmark's labour market agency

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Labour shortage for Nordic agriculture and forestry

**Editorial**

Who pays for Corona in the end?

**News**

The Nordics must pull together to emerge from the epidemic

May 15, 2020

## Theme: The fight against unemployment



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# Who pays for Corona in the end?

We all benefit from measures to prevent transmission, but the economic consequences are not equally divided. The contamination risk must therefore be measured against the economic consequences, now that the Nordic countries are entering a phase of reopening their societies.

EDITORIAL

15.05.2020

BY BJÖRN LINDAHL, EDITOR IN CHIEF

That is the advice from an expert group set up by the Danish government to look at how the restrictions that have paralysed parts of society can be lifted.

The Corona epidemic will change society in different ways, and it will vary between sectors. When Danish hairdressers reopened, their turnover increased until it was higher than in pre-pandemic days. But clothes shops still make 75% of what they did at the same time last year.

Norway's Minister of Finance Jan Tore Sanner points out that the 2008 financial crisis only led to a 0.1% fall in the global GDP. The IMF forecasts that the Corona pandemic will lead to a 3.0% fall.

For now, the fear of infection is greater than the fear of unemployment, at least in the Nordics. But Nordic employment agencies are working full tilt. We have spoken to the directors of public employment agencies in Denmark and Iceland as well as one of those who work directly with people who have lost their jobs in Sweden, Susanne Pettersson-Graff.

She tells us how her job now resembles that in a call centre, where statistics over successful calls are kept while she constantly has 400-500 callers on hold.

Åsa Johansson, head of the department representing employment service employees at the Union of Civil Servants, warns the agency's schedule is now so busy the staff are at risk of burn-out.

European employment agencies have issued a report showing prolonged sitting at work now represents the third largest health and safety risk – and that was before the pandemic. Who is responsible for a safe work environment in the new home offices?

Many probably long to return to the open-plan office. We write about how consultancy engineering firm Rambøll is planning to reopen their workplaces in a safe manner.

One who has refused to sit still is the Oslo-based Israeli dancer Yaniv Cohen. He started a new cultural phenomenon when he realised that many children were prevented from having a birthday party. He offered to dance for free outside their houses, like a splash of colour in everyday lockdown life. Many colleagues were inspired to take part, and it also gives them a small income.

"It's the most motivated who gets the job," was the message Flor Santamaria Mujica got when she was offered a career development course by the Norwegian employment service NAV after being unemployed for six months. She tells her story from a Latin American point of view.

Is motivation or pay the problem when the Nordic agriculture sectors desperately appeal for season workers? Will Thai workers be flown to Finnish Lapland this summer to pick berries?

One thing is certain: Labour market researchers will be busy for a while. The first results have already started to come in, like the Norwegian Work Research Institute WRI's working life barometer. WRI rapidly created corona-related questions for its annual survey. The answers indicate that the pandemic's economic consequences hit people on the lowest wages and lowest income the hardest. Is anyone surprised?

Picture of woman being tested for Covid-19

# The Nordics must pull together to emerge from the epidemic

The Nordic countries will take historically huge steps to limit the economic and social consequences of the Corona epidemic. The governments sometimes chose different measures to fight contamination, with different economic consequences. To get out of the crisis, greater cooperation is needed.

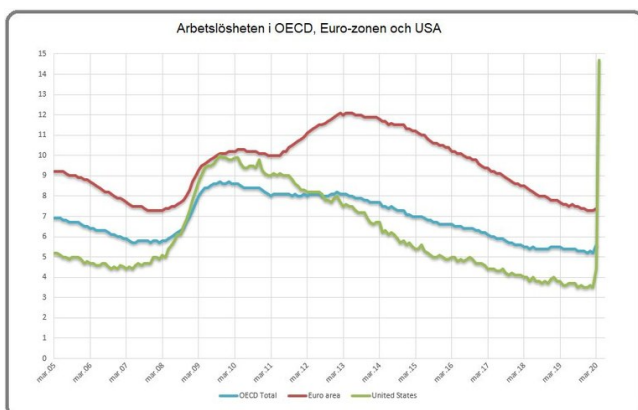
NEWS

15.05.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

Just like a Covid-19 patient's temperature chart tracks the stages of the disease, unemployment is one of the key measures for how countries are dealing with the situation. Countries have not been able to isolate from the pandemic, nor have they been able to isolate their economy from the rest of the world.

Unemployment in the 37 OECD countries rose from 2.1 million to 37 million people in March. Figures from April show a sharp rise in unemployment in the USA from 4.4% in March to 14.7% in the week ending 18 April. That is the highest level since January 1948. It is one of the most frightening charts to come out of the OECD:



*The graph shows annual unemployment figures for the OECD and USA in March since 2005. Some countries vary in the way they define unemployment. The curve for the USA stretches to 18 April, a bit longer than the rest of the curves. Source: OECD*

The Corona pandemic has hit rich and poor countries alike. Statistics show a rapid rise in unemployment in Europe too. Norway's Minister of Finance Jan Tore Sanner presented the country's revised budget on 12 March, pointing out that changes to the autumn budget would normally be small.

This year, the government has already spent 120.6 billion Norwegian kroner (€10.9 billion) more than in the original budget in order to fight unemployment and the economic crisis. On 7 April 290,000 people were fully unemployed and 190,000 were partially unemployed. Unemployment has fallen somewhat since then, as Norway has begun to lift some of the lockdown measures.

But Norway, with its fossil fuel economy, is very dependent on international trade.

"The Norwegian and international economy has been hit by the worst shock since WWII. As a comparison, global BNP fell by 0.1% during the financial crisis. This year the global economy has fallen by 3% according to the IMF," said Jan Tore Sanner.

The financial crisis hit in the summer of 2008. As the graph above shows, unemployment rose until 2013, before it started falling. But only in the past few years has it reached the same level as it was before the financial crisis.

Denmark was first among the Nordics to take drastic measures to limit contamination, by closing schools, restaurants and shops, banning gatherings of people, introducing travel restrictions and asking people who could to work from home.

Tripartite negotiations ended in an agreement where the state would pay the majority of wage costs for companies

where at least one third of staff were at risk of being furloughed. The state would pay 75% of wages, and workers contributed by giving up five days' leave.

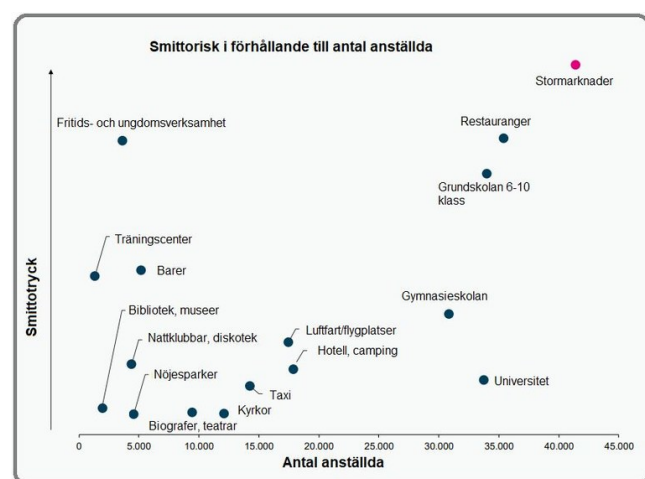
"Anti-contamination measures benefit us all, but the consequences – despite the crisis package – are worse for certain businesses, workers and citizens," writes the Danish expert group tasked with advising how society should return to normal.

The group, led by Professor Torben M. Andersen, have presented a report that aims to present an overview of what is happening and the balances that have to be struck.

"If you look at it from a health point of view, you should begin to lift restrictions in areas where the risk of infection is the lowest. If you look at it from an economic perspective, restrictions should be lifted first where the social consequences are greatest. That is why it is important to balance the health-related and socio-economic consequences, and that the strategy for reopening the country is based on facts."

But to make "informed decisions" as the Danish report calls it, is not that easy.

Nationwide lockdowns like what we have seen over the past months have never happened before, and many of the measures aimed at dealing with the crisis have never been tried out before. There is at the same time a need to make quick decisions, even before all information and statistics are in place. The report's authors have created a graph to try to show the infection risk and socio-economic importance of a business:



Source: Report from the economic expert group regarding the reopening of Denmark. The graph has been somewhat simplified from the original.

The graph shows that universities and upper secondary schools have relatively low infection risks but large socio-economic importance, measured in the number of employees. Supermarkets have a high infection risk but are also so im-

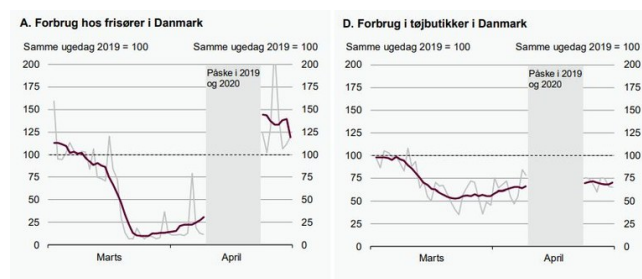
portant socio-economically that they were not closed in Denmark.

There are other factors too, like the fact that gyms – relatively high infection risk, few employees – can still give health benefits in different ways.

When the authorities have considered all the factors and lifted the restrictions, nobody knows much about what will happen then, either. Will consumers change their habits? Will they consume as before, or be cautious about spending money?

"It looks like much of the increase in saving which we have seen so far has been involuntary, and not necessarily a result of more careful consumers because the consumers believe their saving habits will remain relatively unchanged in 12 months from now," writes Danske Bank in analysis.

The Danish expert group has looked at how consumption has changed for some businesses. Here we show hairdressers, who could reopen on 20 April, and the clothing trade, which faced some restrictions but was not closed down:



The graphs show the proportion of card payments, compared with the same weeks last year. Easter has been omitted. The amount paid to hairdressers fell dramatically, but since reopening they have made more than last year. The fall is less dramatic for clothes stores so that the spending is still just 75% compared to last year.

"There are clearly some problems and costs linked to lifting the restrictions too slowly or too quickly. But there is a basic asymmetry. If you move too fast, contamination might spiral out of control and you might have to reintroduce the restrictions," the report's authors write.

"This type of stop-and-go policy would also have major socio-economic consequences. It could lead to increased insecurity with further negative socio-economic consequences.

"Because of this, it might not be desirable to have too rigid a plan for the lifting of restrictions. It is, however, important to explain which conditions decide which restrictions can be lifted," the report's authors conclude.

Picture of Maria Schack Vindum

Maria Schack Vindum

# A testing time for Director of Denmark's labour market agency

As the top boss for the Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment STAR, Maria Schack Vindum has been busy after Corona suspended large parts of the country's employment policy, created mounting unemployment and cleared the way for new solutions.

PORTRAIT

15.05.2020

TEXT: MARIE PREISLER, PHOTO: STAR

Since she became Director for STAR in 2018, Maria Schack Vindum has not experienced a more dramatic week than the one starting 16 March 2020, when the Coronavirus hit the Danish labour market for real. That week saw a 243% increase in newly registered unemployed at STAR's online job portal Jobnet, compared to the average level over the past five years.

"2020 will forever be divided into before and after that week for me. It was a seminal moment as the number of newly registered unemployed rose dramatically and far faster than it did during the 2009 financial crisis. At the same time activation programmes were put on hold, and we had to develop a range of new solutions at breakneck speed," says Maria Schack Vindum.

## Many hit

The number of newly registered unemployed people on Jobnet is not identical to the number of Danes without a job, as unemployment in Denmark is the number of registered full-time unemployed people. The official unemployment figures always lag about one month behind, while the number of newly registered unemployed can be counted every day as a real-time indicator of the Corona crisis' impact on unemployment.

So on the same evening that Prime Minister Mette Fredriksen held her first Corona press conference, Maria Schack Vindum asked her staff to develop a day-to-day count of the number of newly registered unemployed people on Jobnet and the number of jobs available on Jobnet.

After an intense development drive by the agency's number crunchers, these numbers are now published daily and show that by mid-May 2020 – two months after the pandemic hit Denmark – nearly 110,000 new people had registered as unemployed. That is twice as many as the average for the same period over the past five years. If you take away those who have since found jobs, the number of new people has "only" risen by just under 50,000 however.

"This shows that there is a large number of people in the Danish labour market who have been made unemployed as a result of the Coronavirus. At the same time, we're not seeing the usual numbers of people going from unemployment to finding work. Right now there is also 8% fewer jobs on Jobnet compared for the average over the past five years," she says.

Yet there are positive signs. The number of available jobs keeps rising, and there is a steady stream of people going from being unemployed to finding work, points out Maria Schack Vindum. And based on conversations she has had with colleagues from other OECD countries, she is under the impression that the Coronavirus has hit a number of countries harder in terms of unemployment, even though they have introduced a range of supporting measures just like Denmark.

## Continuing education online

In normal circumstances, unemployed people must attend conversations at the municipal job centre, and they must also actively look for jobs in order to access benefits. Municipal job centres also have a duty to facilitate these conversations and to introduce measures to help people find jobs. These

duties are now suspended because of the Coronavirus, yet unemployed people and job centres still maintain some dialogue online on a voluntary basis.

“We don't know what the effects of this will be, but common sense tells us it is better to maintain contact between the unemployed and the jobcentre, than leaving the unemployed in the lurch,” says Maria Schack Vindum.

The Corona crisis has also brought about other new online solutions that represent a big help for unemployed people and businesses, she believes. One model allows workers to take continuing education via distant learning instead of being let go. STAR has worked with the social partners and educational institutions to develop digital continuing education programmes targeted at specific sectors. The authorities cover up to 100% of the companies' wage costs while the workers participate in the education.

### **Praise from government minister**

The new model for continuing education was first used by the tourism sector and the hotel and restaurant trades, and breweries and the offshore sector have since joined. Several other sectors are also preparing their own models.

The Minister of Employment Peter Hummelgaard (Social Democrats) has called this a creative example of how workers can both keep their jobs and return to work when the crisis ends with new knowledge and more skills which will benefit companies. Maria Schack Vindum recommends other Nordic countries to do something similar – if they are not already doing it.

Personally for Maria Schack Vindum it has been an exciting and educational leadership task to reform the organisation to deal with different tasks and working from home 100%. Just like some 450 colleagues she has spent two months working from home, which – as she has discovered – requires solid and frequent leadership communication.

“For me as leader this has been professionally very exciting, and I have learned things I will use also when the Corona crisis has passed. One of the things I believe to be valuable for my colleagues is that I communicate frequently and directly with them.





## Iceland's unemployment soars fivefold

In just four weeks, unemployment in Iceland rose fivefold. At the end of February, 10,000 people had no jobs. By the end of March, the number was 50,000. This has never happened before, says Unnur Sverrisdóttir, head of Iceland's Directorate of Labour VMST.

PORTRAIT

15.05.2020

TEXT: GUÐRÚN HELGA SIGURÐARDÓTTIR, PHOTO: VISIR/HELGI

"This is completely different from the finance crisis in 2008-2009," says VMST's Unnur Sverrisdóttir, as her organisation faces its greatest challenge yet.

"That was a traditional financial crisis, and now we are dealing with something totally new. The entire economy stagnated in a matter of days and the future consequences are anyone's guess. This will be complicated," she continues.

### **The economy is at a standstill**

Tourism makes up one third of Iceland's national income. Globalisation has had a positive impact on tourism, but now it has disappeared altogether in Iceland and around the world.

Iceland's economy was already heading downwards in 2019, but with COVID-19 all tourism activity ended within a few days, travel agencies stopped selling holidays, all flights were grounded and busses which used drive around full of tourists have parked up.

"It's the same story for restaurants, shops and anyone working in the service sector," points out Unnur Sverrisdóttir.

As a result, VMST now faces completely new and challenging tasks. More than 50,000 people are due unemployment benefit at the beginning of May. The previous record, during the 2008-2009 finance crisis, was 10,000-11,000.



### **A new industry**

Since then a completely new industry has emerged. The labour market is also larger than it has ever been. 23,000 work in the tourism sector, and they lost their jobs very quickly, explains Unnur.

Iceland has recently changed the law to provide company employees 75% unemployment cover if they can only work 25%. Most companies make use of the 25% rule, according to Unnur.

That might be changed as hairdressers and other small businesses and freelancers can start working again. But it is not expected to have any major effect on how things develop.

VMST is right now going through some major changes. Staff have been working hard and have demonstrated their huge solidarity, says Unnur proudly.

The VMST is now expanding and 35 people will probably be added to the staff of 130-140 in a few weeks.

Picture of Susanne Pettersson-Graff at the Östersund job centre and Åsa Johansson from the ST trade union

Susanne Pettersson-Graff at the Östersund job centre and Åsa Johansson from the ST trade union

# Pandemic stresses already pushed Swedish employment service

As a result of the Corona pandemic, unemployed people are streaming to the Swedish Public Employment Service. This is putting pressure on an already strained organisation, which has cut 3,500 jobs since the spring of 2019.

THEME

15.05.2020

TEXT: GUNHILD WALLIN, PHOTO: PRIVATE/ST

“We are experiencing a very large number of jobseekers at the Employment Service. There is enormous pressure from newly unemployed people who need to register for unemployment benefit. The top priority is to serve them, and people are having a really tough time,” says Åsa Johansson, who heads the department of the Union of Civil Servants representing 6,000 employment service employees.

The so-called January election completely changed the Public Employment Service’s mandate. Then came the Coronavirus and more than 100,000 have registered as unemployed during March and April as a result.

But the Public Employment Service’s difficulties began with the 2018 elections, which failed to produce a majority government. Thus began months of government negotiations. Not until January 2019 did the Centre Party and the Liberals agree to support a red-green government coalition with Stefan Löfven as Prime Minister.

But their support was not unconditional. Both the supporting parties presented a range of demands, including a reform of the Public Employment Service. The Centre Party and the Liberals criticised what they saw as an inefficient organisation, and demanded that large parts of its operation should be moved to private operators. And it should happen quickly.

The new organisation should be up and running by 2020, which meant 4,500 people were given their notice and 1,600 were made redundant already in early spring 2019. Many chose to take voluntary redundancy and by the end of 2019 3,500 people had already left the organisation. Around 350

of them have been rehired, but are carrying out different jobs.

## Digitalisation was meant to free up time

Many local branches were closed or had their resources cut. The idea was to move as much traditional job matching as possible online, which should also free up time to support those who are far outside of the labour market. At the same time, the entire service was divided into three strands; one serving employers looking for labour, another serving unemployed people and a third running digital services plus helping jobseekers over the telephone.

One of the new functions is called PDM, personal distance meeting. This was added before the January agreement, as part of an efficiency drive. The idea was that the first meeting should be over the telephone, lasting for one hour which would be enough time to gather the necessary information about the job seeker. Only after such a conversation would it be possible to set up a face-to-face meeting. Then the pandemic hit, and the number of new employment benefit applicants skyrocketed. There was a need to quickly arrange more PDMs.

“I was ordered to work with PDM with one day’s notice. Now we’re sat wearing headphones, handling newly unemployed people all day long. And we no longer have 60 minutes for each conversation, only 30,” says Susanne Pettersson-Graff, who has worked for the employment service in Östersund since 1997.



*"The Swedish Public Employment Service is facing both internal and external uncertainties," says Susanne Pettersson-Graff, who carries out so-called personal distance meetings at high speed all day long – while 400-500 people are waiting in a telephone queue.*

She divides her work 50/50 between the Public Employment Service and ST. She describes a working day which can almost be compared to working in a call centre, where statistics are kept for the number of successful calls while she can see that 4-500 people are constantly in a queue to be answered.

#### **Rarely time to rest**

"From the start, many of the newly unemployed came from the taxi and hospitality sectors. We now see that an increasing number of academics are registering. Many are having a tough time, but there is not much scope to provide comfort and support. I have an advantage, having been in this job for so long and having experience from a politically controlled authority, but colleagues are telling me they are not doing so well," says Susanne Pettersson-Graff.

There is rarely time to rest or reflect, she says, because the calls keep coming. You can manage to carry on if you know that it is temporary, according to Susanne Pettersson-Graff.

But she adds that today's difficult situation is partly due to the fact that the organisation had not had time to get back on its feet after notices, redundancies and reorganisation when the virus struck. It was not prepared to deal with the sudden and sharp rise in the number of unemployed people. And the reforms are still not over for the Public Employment Service – it will continue in the coming years. There are also questions surrounding the size of its future funding.

#### **Internal and external uncertainties**

"The organisation was in the process of being reconstructed as the pandemic hit, and we didn't yet know the shape of the working groups and what resources we would be given. Then the Coronavirus came and hit a service already in crisis. Now we are dealing with both internal and external uncertainties," says Susanne Pettersson-Graff.

The technical solutions meant to free up time were not yet up and running when the cuts to the service's work with employers and jobseekers came. As a result, the freed up time has never materialised.

"Digitalisation is a positive thing per se, but there has been too much of an expectation that everyone can deal with it. People who are far removed from the labour market can't do it, and even 'clever' job seekers might need some human guidance," says Susanne Pettersson-Graff.

"The job cuts were meant to be balanced with digital systems and self-service solutions, but we think the decision-makers overestimated what our customers can deal with. If you are in a personal crisis, you might not be that independent. Those working with PDM are also very pushed and have short amounts of time to spend on each conversation. This is also a strain on staff who wish they could offer more support," says Åsa Johansson.

The reorganisation into three separate strands also throws up challenges, as there is not enough cooperation between them. Previously, it was easier to strengthen the part of the organisation that needed strengthening. This is more difficult today as each strand has its own budget and separate management structures.

"If we still had the old structure we would have been less vulnerable. We used to be able to work more together regardless of whether we were working with employers or employees," says Susanne Pettersson-Graff.

Åsa Johansson mainly works with the authorities, but gets a lot of information both from former colleagues and from trade union reps in the field. In her experience there is a lot of uncertainty around where the service is headed, and the changes that have been imposed are having very different effects on different parts within the Public Employment Service.

The head office and the digital operations might see the developments as progressive and positive, while those who work directly with customers and employers have experienced more changes and bigger cuts. In her role as trade union representative, she has to represent both those who like the changes and those who do not. That is difficult.

"I have to find a balance between those who think the changes are OK and those who really struggle. I try to explain that we are doing the best we can from a trade union perspective. There will always be some sort of central employment service, but it will not be like before when each jobseeker had their own contact at the jobcentre," says Åsa Johansson.



# Labour shortage for Nordic agriculture and forestry

As unemployment rises rapidly, many Nordic farmers worry how they will get hold of foreign seasonal workers. The hardest hit are gardens, strawberry farms and other agriculture.

## NEWS

15.05.2020

TEXT: BENGT ÖSTLING, PHOTO: CATA PORTIN

3,000 Thai berry pickers are waiting to hear what will happen with their summer jobs this year. Right now, they cannot get visas to the EU and Finland. Last summer, 16,000 foreigners worked in Finnish agriculture. Now, borders are shut and the food supply situation has become vulnerable. Crops are in danger of being left to rot, if anything at all is sowed or planted. There is not enough foreign labour.

The Finnish Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry has already appealed to young Finns and others who will not have a job this summer – there are tens of thousands of available jobs in agriculture.

### **There are jobs, but with low pay**

The Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Jari Leppä (Centre Party), put it plainly: we cannot do this. Not all producers will get the seasonal labour from abroad that they want and need, the Minister told a press conference.





*Vegetable farmer Esa Rannikko has successfully been growing watermelons for more than 20 years in Halikko in Southwest Finland. He is dependent on seasonal workers in the summer months.*

Foreign workers who are already in the country can be hired, according to new legislation which was hurried through parliament. The Finns Party even suggested that all asylum seekers who are waiting to hear whether they will be allowed to stay should be given a chance to work in agriculture.

Critics have pointed out that the problem perhaps would have been less severe if wages in agriculture were higher. Some say it is morally wrong to be dependent on foreign labour who accept lower pay.

The agriculture sector argues the work is not poorly paid, but that it is hard and that you need skills to do it. This is what previous workers do have.

### **Chartering a plane from Ukraine**

The Finnish government says access to personnel who are essential for the country must be guaranteed. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Pekka Haavisto (Green League), told a press conference that Finland had negotiated with Ukraine, where many of the workers have been coming from.

Finland had an immediate need for 1,500 skilled people, the government argued. Ukraine sends more agricultural workers to Finland than any other country. They have the skills and the knowledge. But the Ukrainian government does not want any of its citizens to leave because of the pandemic.

According to Mr Haavisto, Finland could be granted an exception. Negotiations for this are ongoing between the foreign ministries and the agricultural organisations. The idea is to charter a plane and to pay for a two week quarantine for the Ukrainian workers.



By late April, only one chartered plane has been allowed to leave Ukraine for Finland. Finland is also starting to gradually ease some of its restrictions. There are hopes that borders with neighbouring countries can be opened – first to Estonia – in mid-May.

That would allow the Estonian guest workers who got stuck in Finland (see separate story) during the corona lockdown to return home and meet their families. Ferries between Estonia and Finland have not carried passengers since mid-April.

### **How Nordic countries deal with seasonal workers:**

**SWEDEN:** The Federation of Swedish Farmers LRF says around 8 000 seasonal workers are needed in the forestry and gardening sectors. The Swedish government has extended the ban on immigration for temporary labour from non-EU countries until 15 May. EU citizens can travel freely to Sweden, but since many travel in their own car, they struggle to arrive because they must pass other EU borders on the way.

**NORWAY:** The Norwegian Agrarian Association says 20 000 to 30 000 seasonal workers are needed in Norway. The government has eased the travel ban on seasonal workers who can prove they have been hired for work in Norway. They still have to be quarantined for two weeks before they can start work, however.

**DENMARK:** The Danish government has opted for the testing of all seasonal workers who arrive in the country rather than quarantining them. This also applies to cross-border commuters. Before the crisis, 46 000 EU citizens were employed in Denmark while living abroad.



## Interim Norwegian study of the corona epidemic's effect on workers

Many Norwegian workers have become pessimistic about the future since the corona epidemic broke out. Those with the lowest levels of education and lowest pay have been the hardest hit. People between 30 and 44 are exposed shows a study from the Norwegian Work Research Institute WRI.

### NEWS

15.05.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

For the past 12 years, WRI has produced an annual study on behalf of the YS trade union looking at how workers view their job situation. This year, a range of questions also explored how workers have been affected by anti-corona measures. When the researchers had received the first 1,177 answers from the 3,000 respondents, they made a preliminary analysis which ended on 6 April.

A large majority of the respondents, 69%, say they now worked in a different manner than before the corona epidemic. 31% say they have less to do, while 36% say they have more. 16% have cut their working hours and 10% have experienced a loss in income. 11% of the respondents have been furloughed.





Download the entire interim WRI report here (in Norwegian): *Arbeidslivsbarometerets koronaundersøkelse*

“People with the lowest education and pay are experiencing the highest strain as a result of the corona epidemic in Norway. The number of people who are furloughed and which groups are worst hit is connected to the types of measures that have been introduced. All companies offering non-essential personal services, like restaurants, hairdressers, gyms and so on have been closed,” says Arild Steen, who co-authored the study together with Sverre-Erik Mamelund and Mari Holm Ingelsrud.

At the time of the study, a total of 5,500 people in Norway were infected with the coronavirus. Only a small group of these were part of the study, where only 0.3% of the respondents had had their infection confirmed by a lab or a doctor. However, 11.2% believed they had probably had corona.

### Large households a risk

The highest number of those who believed they had been infected were between 30 and 44, and lived together with their parents in large households in or near Oslo. In this group the number of infected people was six percentage points higher than the average 17.2%.

Among people living in a large, multi-generational household, the number was 24.9% – double that of the 11.2% who believed they had been ill.

One possible explanation is that these are people who live in close proximity of each other in families with immigrant backgrounds. Infection rates have been high among certain groups, like Somali taxi drivers who drove ski tourists who had been to Austria and Italy home from the airport, according to the Aftenposten newspaper (see separate story).

Nearly all the respondents, 94%, say they wash their hands and use hand sanitiser more often than before. Other advice, like social distancing, avoiding public transport and cancelling meetings, were followed differently according to income and education.

The study divides the labour market into four groups:

### Low education, high income    High education, high income

### Low education, low income    High education, low income

It is perhaps not surprising that people with high education find it easier than manual workers to work from home. The largest difference between the groups was seen in how people followed the advice to travel less and to not use public transport.

While 91.3% of people with high education and high income say they follow that advice, only 62.7% of those with low education and low income do the same.

However, personal hygiene is somewhat higher among people with low education and low pay. 85.8% say they wash more or clean more. 82.5% of those with high education and high income say the same.

Women are better at personal hygiene than men, while age play the biggest role. Only 79.5% of 30 to 44 year-olds say they wash more or clean more. The figure for people aged 60 or over is 87.4%. Only 7% of people in all the groups have been using a face mask.

All the four most important anti-infections measures might have had an effect, but the study only found a statistically significant link between washing hands and the number of infected people.

### Many want to study

Some questions focused on how the workers viewed their future. These are some of the conclusions from the study:

- Workers who have been furloughed or experienced a loss of earnings are more worried about losing their jobs in the future. They also believe that they might have to change jobs or trades in the future.
- Workers between 30 and 44, many of whom have families to support, are the most likely to be furloughed.
- Workers who have been furloughed express a greater interest in pursuing more education to help them secure a new job – especially workers under 45 and women.
- At the same time, those who are furloughed are not more interested in pursuing further education than other workers, even if it is offered through their current employer.

“The fact that there is much interest in more education, but that people who are furloughed are sceptical about having further or adult education organised by their employer, could be linked to the fact that they believe they will have to change trades. We will witness a transition to what is considered to be safer jobs,” believes Arild Steen.

“Public sector employees have not been furloughed at all during the corona crisis,” he points out.

# A Norwegian NAV course seen through Latin American eyes

I remember the day the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration, (NAV), sent me that letter answering about a non-economic help I have applied weeks before, I needed to speak with a counsellor. I said I was a journalist and that I wished to find a job which would match fields of my competence, so I wanted to speak with someone.

## COMMENTS

15.05.2020

TEXT: FLOR SANTAMARIA MUJICA

I was happy to receive at last communication from NAV but not for long. To my disappointment, the answer was “we have studied your case and we concluded that you can find yourself a job. You are educated and you can speak Norwegian. You do not need our help. Good luck ahead.”

I got so sad, trapped in a hopeless situation as I was more than six months unemployed and not receiving the daily support because my past jobs were small and of various branches. “We can’t help you.”

Why not? I wondered. I am not even asking for money. You cannot help because I have an education and speak the language? Is that a crime? I felt discriminated for my knowledge.

I am a journalist, I had a top career in my hometown, Venezuela, I married a Norwegian and ended up in Oslo. My professional background never impeded me to try new sources of income or to get integrated and learn the ways of the Nordics. When I received the “We can’t help you” answer, it felt like an institutional rejection.

I was denied the basic right to be listened to. But what was I expecting? From a bureaucratic entity. I sent a complaint to NAV and they offered me a career development course but, what was that?

## Slowly by the suburbs of unemployment

I started the course in the winter. The classrooms were in a building by the highway E18 in Oslo. I could not avoid finding myself humming AC/DC’s “Highway to Hell” the first days. I went there all week, six hours every day. With the help of good teachers and the cooperation among the attendees, who would become my new network, I had three months to get employed or enter an internship.

Every Monday a new group would start, and the old ones will move on with more knowledge about how to make a CV Norwegian style, answer questions in an interview, write a cover letter, building a network and listening motivational speeches and workshops work-related.

We were equals there, no matter what degree instruction we had. We were walking slowly in the middle of a road called the Norwegian work market. Some had been unemployed for a year or more; some had been burned out and came back to try again. Our interaction was polite and distant like good colleagues.

Some had the best attitude to find the dream job and others seemed like teenagers grounded in the principal’s office doing extra homework. We laughed bold about ourselves, we were full of stories, we were harsh, but we all were compassionate too

## We just want to work

An Eritrean journalist who had some time there once told me that the great majority of the people attending the course just wanted to work. “We don’t want to live from welfare, we want to have a job that allows us a quality of life to move on. but for many of the people here, coming here represents a long and dark path”. He was right. In retrospective, looking at all the personal values of those I met, plus their potential, I thought: “if I were a billionaire as Norway, I would hire them all”.

It is there, in these career developing centres spread of all the country, where I would dig to find my employees.

Another time, a nineteen-year-old Norwegian girl who had never worked before asked me to bake a cake. “I am so much craving for a home-made cake.” But we sat down in the time out room and I asked about the Choco-rush. And filled with frustration tears she replied:

“Why can’t I have a job? They don’t hire me because I don’t have experience. But if I don’t have the chance, I will never have any experience.”

I was happy to be there to listen to her. Because if someone there had the rights to dream big, it was her. A young woman. Low self-esteem and dreams looking unreachable, it’s the last thing we want in a functional society, I thought. And someone who can make me bake a cake can get a job!

A part of our work was to make an analysis of the offered positions and if we were suitable candidates. It was a Russian mountain of emotions; you could hear us in the lunchtime. Every time asking ourselves, Am I qualified for this position? Breaking through our insecurities every time we got a rejection. But we kept applying for job after job. Like Sisyphus, rolling a rock to the summit every day, again and again.

You need to be like an athlete to enter the work market in Oslo, and not talking about finding your “dream job” or if you have a Scandinavian name, which not having it makes it harder. I asked my teacher Karen once, who gets the job?

“The one who finds the motivation.” Or the one with the big fat connection, I added!

But in the end, what started out feeling like an AA meeting, turned out to be one of the most honest experiences I ever had in eight years in Norway, I saw many professionals back on track again, and it felt good.



## The dancer who spreads joy with a new cultural phenomenon

A stop to public performances gave choreographer Yaniv Cohen (42) the idea for Flekk. A faceless creature giving work to furloughed dancers and birthday fun to children.

THEME

15.05.2020

TEXT: SILJE KATHRINE SVIGGUM, PHOTO: KNUT EGIL WANG / MOMENT

A bright green monster sneaks into a garden at Tåsen, Oslo. Soon it will start wiggling and spinning to “Bad Guy” by Billie Eilish, while birthday girl Kaja Isachsen (10) and her family joyfully watch from a safe distance on their balcony. After ten minutes of dancing, the performance for Kaja is over. But for dance artist and choreographer Yaniv Cohen (42) the day has only just begun.

We meet him for an interview a few weeks later at a cafe behind The Royal Palace. The Oslo based Israeli has been dancing alone at 80 birthdays since he began doing this in April. The Flekk concept – where you get a free visit from a dancer to entertain children aged four to ten on their birthday – has spread to ten Norwegian cities since the start in Oslo.

“I got the idea when my daughter was asked to draw a card for a friend in class, as part of her homeschooling. That made me realise that this is a special time for children. They don’t get to celebrate their birthday,” says Yaniv Cohen.

“The dance performance I was due to premiere with this spring was postponed. At the same time, I had already finished my period of teaching at KHiO Oslo National Academy of the Arts. I suddenly had some time on my hands. It made me want to contribute with something that could make people happy.”

### **Free at a price**

With input from his eight-year-old daughter Lovi Cohen, who is a pupil at The Ballet School at The Royal Ballet, the Flekk

character was born. One week later, Yaniv ordered costumes and a loudspeaker and got Lovi to film from a window while he danced in his own backyard in Old Oslo.

“From the moment I put the video on Facebook, bookings started flooding in. The first week alone I danced at 29 birthdays,” the choreographer says.

The big demand made him seek the cooperation of Dansens Hus in Oslo, Carte Blanche in Bergen – where Yaniv himself was a crew member and danced for eight years – and DansiT in Trondheim. The project now employs furloughed dancers who got in touch. After 15 years in Norway, Yaniv Cohen has learned to combine his passion and willingness to take risks which he says he has inherited from his native Israel, “where many artists work for free and live like dogs”, and Norwegian red tape.

Cohen funds his own work through a state artist grant and his KHIO teaching salary, and offers his Flekk services for free.

“But the other dances are paid,” he underlines.

It is free to book Flekk, yet most people want to pay, Cohen says. The voluntary payment goes to the dancers, and a fund covers the rest which means each dancer will always get 500 kroner (€46) per performance.

“I have applied for support from the Arts Council Norway and hope to be able to increase the pay to 700 kroner.”

*That's not much?*

“No, but this is voluntary work in a very special time. I have put 12,000 kroner (€1,090) into the project from my own pocket. Dansens Hus has covered the cost of car hire, but I am still running at a loss,” Cohen answers and adds:

“I am able to do this because I have a steady income in a time where the culture sector is paralysed. Dancers without a state arts grant who don't know whether they'll be able to pay next month's rent cannot do the same, of course. I know I am privileged. That's why I want to give something back to the Norwegian society.”

### **Garden dance with risks**

The project lasts until 30 June. After that, Cohen believes demand will naturally fall as lockdown measures in Norway are eased. In the longer term, Cohen wants to make a Flekk show, but before that, he has applied for support to set up an offer for kindergartens.

For freelance dancer Maja Naomi Furnes (28) Flekk is a very welcome source of income in a time of crisis.

“I immediately signed up!”, says Furnes, whose background is modern and contemporary dance.

“Flekk has definitely been important to me. It helps in everyday life when everything has been cancelled. I am in a transition period, as I had just managed to finish a stay in Brazil and was about to audition in Switzerland when the Coronavirus hit. I was also supposed to travel to London for a work-related matter, but everything got cancelled.”

The 28-year-old says it is pure luck that she can stay at home with her parents right now.

“I am lucky not to have to pay rent, that is the greatest worry for other dancers I talk to. I don't think we will get back to normal performances until September or October at the earliest. Perhaps it will take even longer.”

*What is it like to dance as Flekk?*

“To begin with it is nerve-racking because it is difficult to see through the costume. Today I hit my head on a drainpipe, another time I nearly ended up in the wrong garden. Watching the children's reactions is incredibly rewarding. Some are shy, some get scared, while others are in from the start. It is fun to be allowed to be comical as a dancer,” says Maja Naomi Furnes.

### **An ambivalent trade union**

Trade union leader Kristine Karåla Øren at Norske Dansekunstnere – the trade union for dancers, choreographers and pedagogues – describes a trade in deep crisis when we call her to talk Flekk.

“An entire food chain has collapsed. The Corona epidemic has hit the dance sector hard. In Norway alone some 60 dance and ballet schools are impacted. On top of that, you have 160 culture schools which offer dance, now all closed. Both performers and teachers have lost their work with the stroke of a pen,” says Kristine Karåla Øren.

*What do you think about the Flekk project?*

“Flekk is a fantastic example of what dance and creativity can do – creating good experiences for the audience and for the performer. Yaniv Cohen manages to generate work for himself and for others, he creates new ways of expressing the art and shows us new ways of doing things. This is at the core of all art. In that way, Flekk has much value.”

The trade union leader hesitates a bit.

*But...?*

“The level of compensation is nowhere near standard daily fees. That is not okay. This is not to criticise Yaniv Cohen as a person, what he has managed to do is great. I also want to applaud the institutions who contribute to the organisation and exposure of the Flekk project. But the low compensation shows the desperate need for organisations that can both make projects available and release funds directly, like wages. Dance needs more distribution tools with predictable



and secure financing, so that it becomes possible to produce and showcase current dance productions to more people."

### **Best in a crisis**

Yaniv Cohen himself feels he thrives in a crisis, perhaps because he is so used to them. He grew up in the desert city of Kiryat Gat, in South-East Israel, as the youngest of four siblings. His father owned a furniture factory, his mother was a social worker. Art was not part of everyday life before he was encouraged to start dancing during his three years-long compulsory military service.

Despite being in top shape, he did not have to serve on the frontline because his parents had already lost one son. His youngest brother was killed in the army at 19, when Yaniv was 11, while his oldest brother – a pilot – died in a helicopter accident at 37, just before Yaniv turned 24.

"My life has been coloured by loss. Being an Israeli dancer and choreographer in Norway is a negotiation between the past, present and future. It is constant. As a Jew, I am part of a people used to persecution. It gives you a feeling of always having to deal with something. It doesn't matter how integrated I am in Norway, a part of me will always be an outsider. As an outsider you have to negotiate with your surroundings who you are."

*Why do you think it was you who created Flekk?*

"I think it has something to do with my past. I enjoy challenging situations. In Norway, you have all kinds of opportunities, but the system here is very slow. I have projects which I have been working on for four years and for which I have applied for support, which still have not made it on to the stage.

Suddenly we got the Corona situation, which limited what I can do. This brings some clarity. As a dancer, it is easier to work when you have a clearly defined task. If you have too many opportunities and the task is too open, you start doubting yourself."

Yaniv Cohen cracks a smile and remembers his time as a freelance dancer in the Nordics.

"The Danes were open and inclusive, well organised and free with their bodies. Iceland was chaos! Just like Israel mentally, the attitude being one of 'everything will work out'. Which it does. In the end."

He is laughing wholeheartedly now.

"And then you have Norway, the most well-organised place I have been. But Norwegians are far more reserved, both in body and the way they express themselves. Norway and Israel are two extremes. By living in Norway I can balance in the middle."

*What can we all learn from the life of dancers as people are furloughed and losing their jobs?*

"Invest in something you enjoy. It can be tough, and I can't guarantee it will make your life easier. But by insisting to do something you enjoy, you make life richer."



## Prolonged sitting an increasing health and safety risk in Europe

Sedentary work has become one of the main challenges identified in the third major study of European work environments from the European Agency for Health and Safety at Work.

NEWS

15.05.2020

TEXT AND PHOTO: BJÖRN LINDAHL

The ESENER-3 survey includes telephone interviews carried out in 2019, and the report compares the answers to those given in ESENER-2 from 2014.

A total of 45,000 workplaces with more than five employees in 33 European countries have been answering questions about their work environment. The questions were put to those *'who know best about health and safety in the establishments'* about the way health and safety risks are managed at their workplace.

The same amount or more risk factors are seen in most areas compared to five years ago. It is difficult to identify any good news, despite the fact that Nordic countries largely treat work environment issues as a priority. The answers tell us more

about how common the risks are perceived to be, rather than the severity of them.

The report states that:

"The most frequently identified risk factors in the EU28 are repetitive hand or arm movements (65% of establishments, up from 52% in 2014), having to deal with difficult customers, pupils, patients (61%, up from 58%) and lifting or moving people or heavy loads (54%, up from 47%).

### **Prolonged sitting**

59% of establishments consider prolonged sitting as a risk factor for their employees. That means this is considered the third most serious risk when establishments chose between

various alternatives. Each establishment might have more than one health and safety risk at any one time.

Repetitive movements and psychosocial risks come out on top if you look at establishments across all 28 EU countries. Prolonged sitting is seen as a risk which is considerably higher in some establishments than in others. 93% of companies in the financial and insurance sector see this as a problem, as do 91% of public administration establishments.

Earlier reports included a question regarding "tiring or painful positions" which did touch on prolonged sitting. Five years ago, 56% of establishments saw this as a health and safety risk.

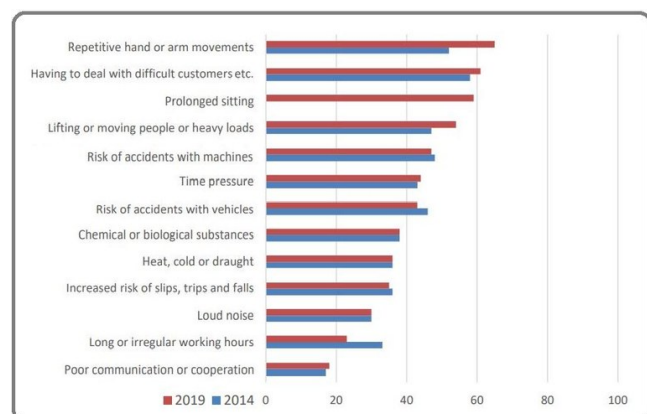
Three out of four of the most common health and safety risks seen among the establishments concerns musculoskeletal disorders. The fourth group concerns psychosocial risk factors. This is a particular problem in service sector jobs, where people might have to deal with difficult customers, patients and students.

### Time pressure

Like in ESENER-2, time pressure is still cited as a top risk factor in the Nordic countries. 74% of establishments in both Finland and Sweden say this, while in Denmark the figure is slightly lower at 73%. There is a fairly big step down to countries outside of the Nordic region that see this as a problem, with the Netherlands highest on the scale. 64% of establishments in that country have ranked this risk as number two.

The survey points out that it is difficult to know whether this is down to a higher level of awareness of the problem among the Nordics, or whether the risk really is higher. But there has been no improvement in the Nordic countries for five years.

Out of the twelve different risk factors the survey deals with in both 2014 and 2019, a major improvement can be seen in only one: long or irregular working hours are seen as less of a problem compared to five years ago.



*The European Agency for Health and Safety at Work has asked 45,000 establishments in Europe with more than five employees to answer which factors they consider to repre-*

*sent the greatest risk to their work environment. Several consider there has been an increase in risks compared to five years ago, but it is difficult to know whether this is due to an increase in awareness or an increase in real risk.*

ESENER-3 demonstrates that there has been a reduction in labour inspections in nearly all European countries, including the Nordic ones. Asked whether inspections had been carried out, nearly 60% of establishments in Denmark, Finland and Iceland said they had, while 35% of establishments in Sweden and fewer than 30% of Norwegian ones had seen an inspection. Compared with five years ago, the fall was biggest in Denmark and Norway.

### Digitalisation

Changes linked to digitalisation represent another major risk factor. This involves everything from computers, smartphones and surveillance cameras to robots. Only 6% of European establishments say they do not use any such tools as part of their work. Discussions about digitalisation are most common in Hungary and Romania, where 58% and 42% respectively said such discussions had been had, compared to 24% for the whole of Europe.



## Infection control key as Rambøll reopen open-plan office

Rambøll employees enjoy working in open-plan offices, but also see the need to follow Norway's infection control rules. Researchers are warning people to be even more cautious.

### NEWS

14.05.2020

TEKST OG FOTO: BJØRN LØNNUM ANDREASSEN

Reopened schools are dividing classes into smaller groups of pupils, sat at a greater distance from each other. But what do adults do in open-plan offices after weeks of working from home because of Corona?

Robert Hoven is the head safety representative for Rambøll Norway and for the Trondheim office.

"Our management has been in close contact with trade unions to find the best possible solutions from day one. We have been discussing whether we have enough distance between each other. After the government has now advised one metre, things are OK because we have designated spaces in open-plan offices. We believe hot-desking would be more dangerous," Hoven tells the Nordic Labour Journal.

The engineering firm employs some 1,600 people in Norway, and nearly all work in open-plan offices.

"Open-plan offices are a framework condition in Rambøll. Just a few people can use cubicles in certain instances. I think working like this is perfectly fine. Especially as the company has introduced the very highest standards of infection control. I am not worried," says Hoven.

### Well-being survey

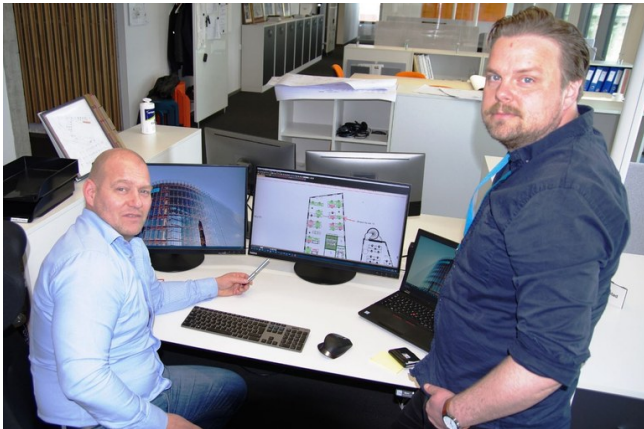
Seven weeks after the Corona alarm was first sounded, Hoven, who is responsible for health and safety, says the aim is to have no more than half of the 280 staff back at work in the Trondheim offices. This way they can keep their distance, he explains.



“We have carried out a well-being survey. It shows that employees over 50 who do not have children work more efficiently from home. Those under 30 who live alone have not enjoyed working from home as much, however. We also have had people calling in saying ‘you have to let me come back to work or I’ll go crazy, I need to talk to someone apart from the cat’,” says Hoven with a smile.

#### “Good response”

Bjørn Terje Pettersen is the Trondheim Office Manager. He underlines that their own information regarding the Corona situation shows their employees are completely happy with the information they receive and with the contact between employees.



*There is a careful plan for where everyone will be sitting in the open-plan office, explain Lasse Zahl-Johansen and Robert Hoven.*

“We have chosen to have digital lunch and coffee at 2 pm for anyone who has the time. We have carried out a careful reopening of offices, and everything has been guided by official government advice. We have a system for booking spaces in the open-plan office, making sure there is two metres distance from the start.”

Lasse Zahl-Johansen is the head of the department we visit in the open-plan office building. He explains that employees’ office space needs are revised daily.

“Some people can carry on working from home. But those with families and not enough peace to do their work, or those who struggle due to a lack of social interaction, can come to work. We have a sketch of the open-plan office for plotting in who will be sitting where. Staff mark their workspace with a post-it note so that cleaners can disinfect it ready for the next day,” he says.

Those who come in, feel nearly too safe and must make sure they remember the Corona rules.

“People enjoy hearing other colleagues’ voices, so we need to have room for these things.”

#### More illness in open-plan solutions

Doctor Stein Knardahl is Head of Department of Work Psychology and Physiology at the National Institute of Occupational Health (STAMI). He underlines that research shows sickness leave is more prevalent in companies with open-plan offices. The consequence after the Corona pause will be that more companies will be considering measures.

“Viruses, disruptions and demotivation have increased sickness leave in companies with open-plan offices. We don’t really know how much the Covid-19 virus spreads through the air, whether the airborne droplets travel one or two metres. If you talk softly, you get smaller droplets, but with loud talk, droplets grow in size and can stay airborne for longer. But in an open-plan office it is not certain how much of the virus can be in the air if an infected person uses the room. We know very little about how much is needed for someone to become infected,” explains Knardahl.

He underlines that people who sit still are better protected against infection than people who move around in the same room.

“Keeping to one desk should absolutely be something that is considered in an open-plan office. Working from home should also still be considered. Chinese research shows that people have been infected by Covid-19 through the air condition system in a restaurant, but knowledge here is sparse. We are considering ways of measuring the virus in the air,” he says.

#### Restrict activity

“The most important thing when trying to prevent infections is to assess the probability of meeting a carrier. Activity increases this probability. Distance is important. We believe a carrier’s droplets fall to the ground relatively quickly. That is why we have the distancing rule. Two metre high dividing walls can be a possible measure,” says Knardahl.

And of course we should still clean surfaces and wash our hands, he adds, and points out that face masks are compulsory in some places.

“Including in New York, where they say it is a moral duty to protect others.”