The International Importance of Swedish Research on Work, Organization, and ICT – for the Development of Competitiveness and Societal Welfare

The new Swedish centre–right government has proposed that Arbetslivsinstitutet, the National Institute for Working Life (NIWL), shall be suddenly closed down beginning January 1.

The NIWL has contributed substantially to the world’s body of critical knowledge as well as innovative methods of investigation in all domains of working life. We, the undersigned, have cooperated with NIWL researchers, in multidisciplinary networks and projects that often combine technology and social science research. Some of us have cooperated in projects to develop an innovative Scandinavian approach to participatory design of work and ICT, today one of the strong strands of research on human-computer interaction. Other key areas are for example ergonomics and work and health.

NIWL scholars have made essential contributions to research on the design and use of new technology. Research has focused particularly on information and communication technologies (ICT) and related societal and industrial transformations, and has tackled the complex issues of change in sectors as different as the ICT industry itself, the automotive industry, call centres, digital media and journalism. Basic to all of this research is a concern for the quality of work (health, competence, influence, creativity) in competitive organizations, emphasising production that is sustainable both socially and economically. Such problem-oriented, multidisciplinary and applied research is needed in order to balance academically oriented research – in working life as well as in business.

Through the immediate and total closing of the NIWL, international networks of cooperation and intellectual capital that have been built up over
decades are in jeopardy. We cannot believe that this is the government’s intention, and have thus hope that the parliament will demand that the government evaluate the institute’s research in an intellectually responsible way and present a well-designed plan to reorganize and to continue providing funding for working life research in Sweden, perhaps as a network of work life research units linked to appropriate universities. In addition to new basic resources, there is a need for new resources to research funding. Work-life research is a public good in need of public money. This is true for business studies as well as work life research. There is no invisible hand on a market that creates and distributes research resources. A visible hand is needed.

Given its leading position within ICT, Sweden should have a special interest in studying how to combine the development of new technology and competitiveness with good jobs and economic welfare. Employment in ICT-related sectors will continue to grow, and work-life research is central to building sustainable productivity growth and employee well-being.

This research is essential not only for Sweden. In order to establish sustainable competitiveness in an era of knowledge based economies, and in line with the EU Lisbon strategy, research on technology, work organization, and innovation are key ingredients. They are also keys to reaching the EU goal of an “information society for all”. NIWL has played a central role. Rather than being dispersed and obliterated, Swedish applied work life research needs immediate new funding so that it can continue in its leading role.

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