



# BroadVoice

Broadening the spectrum of employee voice in workplace innovation

## The Virtuous Interaction Between Direct and Representative Participation

### Sweden – National Report

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The report examines direct and indirect employee influence in Sweden within the framework of the EU project BroadVoice. The project aims to explore how industrial democracy can be promoted through the participation of workers, both through trade union representation (indirect) and through direct participation in work organisation, technological change and skills development.

#### **The Swedish model – a stable but challenged structure**

The Swedish labour market model is highly institutionalised and based on collective agreements between the social partners, with minimal government interference. Historically, the model has been developed through cooperation between trade unions and Social Democratic governments, especially during the 1970s when important laws were introduced such as the Co-determination Act (MBL), the Work Environment Act and the Act on Board Representation.

The model is based on the union acting as the main channel for the workers' voice, which means a "union monopoly" of influence. At the same time, direct influence – such as participation in planning, decisions and quality work – is common and accepted by the unions, as long as it takes place within the framework of the current agreement.

#### **Direct participation – not a contradiction**

Swedish trade unions do not regard direct participation as a threat, instead there is an idea-based consensus between employers and unions that efficient and rational production is the basis for the distribution of wealth. There is also a strong legal framework, mainly MBL, which ensures that unions cannot be circumvented in change processes.

#### **Institutional support for direct influence**

In addition to laws and collective agreements, two types of institutions are identified:

- i. Those who create the conditions for direct participation, e.g. through skills development (Afa Insurance, Prevent, Suntarbetsliv).
- ii. Those that directly aim to increase direct participation, such as Produktionslyftet and Gilla Jobbet.

These initiatives are often joint and supported by both employers and unions.

#### **Four case studies – from industry to the public sector**

Four case studies highlight how direct participation manifests itself in different sectors:

### ***The Workshop Company (manufacturing industry)***

A small engineering company introduced Lean production through the union-supported development program “Produktionslyftet” (The Production Leap). Direct participation takes place via daily planning meetings, deviation reporting and operator maintenance. The union participated in the project's steering group and saw positive effects on the work environment and work engagement. The result is a clear example of democratic collaboration between direct and indirect participation.

### ***The Mine (mining)***

A major mine implemented a technological shift to autonomous trucks. The project aimed to increase productivity and safety but also involved a comprehensive change in job roles. Trade unions were involved from the start, ensuring that staff were redeployed rather than laid off. The project followed the rules prescribed by MBL and combined union collaboration with direct dialogue and communication with the employees.

### ***The Municipality (public sector)***

A municipality with high sickness absence and staff turnover initiated a work environment project with the help of “Suntarbetsliv” (Healthy working life). The focus was on changing the perspective from recruitment problems to work environment problems. Through structured workplace meetings and tools from Suntarbetsliv, the direct influence increased. The result was reduced absenteeism, increased job satisfaction and an improved working climate. The union's role was primarily advisory and supportive.

### ***The Warehouse (private service sector)***

A warehouse company in healthcare logistics introduced a Lean-inspired way of working with self-organizing teams and daily planning. The union was involved in the change work, but there were concerns about increased algorithmic control and monotony in the work. A rotation system was introduced to reduce load. Here, the tension between efficiency and the work environment is more evident than in other cases.

## **Conclusions**

The report shows that direct and indirect participation are not in contradiction to each other in Sweden – rather, they complement each other. A crucial success factor is that the union is often involved from the start in development projects, which creates trust and prevents conflicts.

Despite challenges such as technological development and reduced union membership among certain groups, the Swedish model is relatively strong. The case studies confirm that direct participation, when integrated with the established model of union influence, can lead to both organizational efficiency and improved working conditions.

The future of direct participation in Sweden looks bright, as long as it takes place in interaction with trade union influence and within the framework of established legal and joint structures.

