

Attractive Work Process

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 21st century, many companies have been facing a work force shortage. The ability to recruit and retain skilled employees is seen as one of the most important issues for the survival and development of companies. There is a need for workplaces to be attractive. A process aiming at raised attractiveness has been developed. It is based on a model of qualities that contribute to making work attractive. All employees participate by answering a questionnaire about the importance of different qualities and to what degree they are fulfilled. Further discussions at the workplace on what to preserve and what to develop form the basis of an action plan. The most positive aspects of the method are its “promoting perspective” and that it engages all the employees.

Attractive Work, employee engagement, small enterprises, development process

Introduction

Many companies, both in Sweden and other parts of the world, have been facing a work force shortage since the beginning of the 21st century (Rauhut, 2002; Funch and Ehnrooth, 2008; Manpower, 2008). Labour shortage problems go beyond national borders. One example is the

enlargement of the EU in 2004, which led to increased labour mobility, and this is expected to increase when more European countries open their labour markets (Dølvik & Eldring, 2008). That means that today's employers have to compete with companies around the world in recruiting their work force.

The ability to recruit and retain skilled employees is seen as one of the most important issues for the survival and development of companies (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). In 2008, labour shortages were the biggest obstacle for expansion and affect more than 20 % of small enterprises (those with 1-49 employees) in Sweden (Kennemar & Jagrén, 2008). In spite of the recession, six of ten small enterprises in Sweden say that they have good opportunities for expansion, but labour shortages are seen as the second biggest obstacle to expansion affect about 15 % of companies (Kennemar, Jagrén, et al., 2009). The situation 2009 is exceptional because of the recession. Before this, skilled workforce shortages had been the dominating obstacle for expansion for a long period among Swedish SMEs. To be attractive is not simply a matter of recruiting a work force. Companies need to retain and engage skilled employees to be successful as well. It is argued that attractive workplaces, with their increased levels of commitment, lead to higher productivity (Marks & Huzzard, 2008).

As described above, is there a need for companies to be attractive and, more precisely, more attractive than others. The question is, then, how a company's attractiveness can be increased. For nearly a decade, researchers at the university Högskolan Dalarna have conducted research concerning Attractive Work. Research and development projects have been closely linked with the situations SMEs face, and have been carried out using an interactive research approach. Attractive Work focuses on positive aspects of work and can be seen as a part of positive organizational scholarship (POS) (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008).

The research concerning Attractive Work has its point of departure in industrial SMEs' practical problem of attracting a work force, especially young workers. Companies were concerned that they

were unable to recruit properly trained young workers. Discussions were held on who to blame and different arguments were made. Some examples: workplaces and work tasks are not good enough, which is the responsibility of the employers; schools are not good enough, which leads to few students, and the schools are responsible; and youngsters don't understand what it is like to work at industrial companies and need more information about work and the workplace. Discussions among companies, schools, municipalities, and researchers resulted in the insight that there was a need for information as well as development. Workplace development was needed in order to increase the willingness of employees to stay at workplaces and increase their engagement in their work tasks. However, development grounded in the needs of prospective young workers was also needed. Information about existing and developing working conditions had to be given to prospective employees. The companies understood that they had to offer attractive work to both current and prospective employees.

The situation described above raised questions such as “How can we be attractive?” and “What makes work attractive?” Hedlund and Pontén (2006) have defined work as attractive if a person is interested to apply for it, wants to stay and is engaged in it.

It is the individual who judges the attractiveness of work based on her/his life situation. Hedlund (2007) has identified some characteristics for Attractive Work. The positive aspects of work, i.e. qualities that contributes to make a job attractive, are focused upon. The individual compares positive aspects of work to other jobs or to the importance of those positive aspects. The attractiveness of work is also dynamic, i.e. the attractiveness of one job can change over time. For example, a part-time job close to home may be very attractive for a parent with small children but twenty years later, when the children have left home, a job with career opportunities becomes more attractive. Changed assessments of work's attractiveness depend both on re-valuation of different aspects of work, and on re-conception of the aspects. (Hedlund, 2007)

In order to understand what makes work attractive, i.e. to identify positive aspects of work, the Attractive Work Model was developed. It gives an overall picture containing more than 80 qualities that contribute to making work attractive. The qualities are divided into three categories. The category Attractive Work Contents includes dimensions that deal with what the employee does during the performance of a job and how she or he does it. Work Satisfaction includes dimensions that deal with how the employee thinks she or he benefits from the job. Attractive Working Conditions describes the conditions for performing a job, some of which are common for all employees at a workplace. (Åteg, Hedlund, et al., 2004)

From the Attractive Work Model, a questionnaire containing all the qualities was designed. The questionnaire, *Questionnaire Concerning Attractive Work*, makes it possible to measure attractiveness, and the results from the questionnaire are supposed to provide a basis for the development of attractive work and workplaces. The main part of the questionnaire measures the individual's opinion of the qualities, both how important each quality is to make a job attractive, and to what extent each quality corresponds with the current job. One general question is "To what extent do you consider your current job to be attractive?" Respondents have five alternatives to choose from, from "Not at all" to "Completely". Finally, the questionnaire contains two questions about how important work is and the main reason for working. (Högskolan Dalarna, 2008)

A method based on the questionnaire has been developed in order to support SMEs in their ambition to offer more attractive work and workplaces, the Attractive Work Process. The aim of the process is to support companies and organisations in developing more attractive jobs. The focus is primarily to raise the level of attractiveness for those already employed. Raised attractiveness among current employees is presumed to raise the attractiveness for prospective employees as well. The aim of this paper is to describe the Attractive Work Process and the experiences of its use.

Method

The Attractive Work Process has been developed within interactive research and development projects with SMEs in Dalarna, Sweden. The workplaces represent different branches, for example estate management, parish work, museum, and elderly care. The process has been supported by a process leader, i.e. a researcher or a person from a supporting service company, with expertise in work environment, development processes, and Attractive Work.

The Attractive Work Process method, like the Attractive Work Model, focuses on promotion and possibilities. Aspects of work that are seen as important to its attractiveness should be protected and developed. A characteristic of Attractive Work is that it is an ongoing task that will never be finished. Development work has to be seen as a process, not a project.

The questionnaire, *Questionnaire Concerning Attractive Work*, measures the importance of different qualities to make the job attractive and fulfilment in the current job (Högskolan Dalarna, 2008). This creates a picture of employees' opinions. Important areas, as well as areas prioritized for development, can be identified. With that as a basis, discussions can be held about how different qualities relate to each other.

The Attractive Work Process contains the following six steps:

1. Inform, plan and motivate
2. Complete the questionnaire
3. Analyze results
4. Report results and prioritize
5. Action plan
6. Measure/evaluate

During the development of the Attractive Work Process, the central and important aspects of the process have been identified, based on the experiences of participating researchers and companies.

An overall description of the content and the important aspects identified will be described in each step. Important common aspects are also noted.

Inform, plan and motivate

The first task is to work with the company's manager to define the aim and objectives of the Attractive Work Process. Initial information is given to everybody who will be involved – management, employees, union representatives, et al. – to establish the work. It must be clear that the necessary time and resources for the coming process are available.

The person at the workplace who is responsible for the process should be contacted. It is an advantage if this contact person has a working group to cooperate with. The person or group should participate in planning and running the process, so they need resources, such as time. The process leader and the contact person plan the process. It includes information, meetings, and intermediary work. Decisions have to be taken about when and where each activity will take place, and who will be responsible.

The employees should be informed about the company's aims and objectives in using the Attractive Work Process. The Attractive Work Model and the questionnaire should also be described for them. The employees should be informed that everybody's opinions are important in the process of finding ways to make a workplace attractive. They should also be informed that no one is forced to participate; participation should be seen as an opportunity to influence the process. Further, the planning of the process should be described and the employees informed that the results will be presented on group or company levels.

Important aspects

- It is of great importance to have the manager's support before the process starts. The aim of the process should be discussed and established with the manager. Time and resources must be discussed and reserved for the whole process. The process leader and the manager must

also agree on and carry out expectations from the beginning. They have a common responsibility to make them realistic and practicable.

- The planning of the process is also important. It is easy to forget that it takes time to start up and to end the process. The process leader who is familiar with the process and a person or a group from the company with knowledge about the organisation should do the planning together. The time and resources needed for the process must be available and should not interfere with employees' other duties. For example, the company must be prepared to follow up and realize the action plan.
- From the start, employees should receive information about the aim of the process and how it is to be carried out. This is important, since the process is based on employee participation. Another aim of this information is to raise employees' motivation to participate.

Complete the questionnaire

All employees should complete the questionnaire. First, the information already given should be repeated. The questionnaires and instructions on how to complete them should be given to the employees. It takes about 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The process leader, or someone else who can answer any questions that come up, should be present.

An opportunity for those who are not present to complete the questionnaire at a later time should be arranged. One way is to leave the questionnaire with an envelope so the completed questionnaire can be returned without the possibility of identifying the respondent.

A web-based version can be used as an alternative to a paper questionnaire. Repeated information can be given by e-mail at the same time as access to the questionnaire is given. The employees complete the questionnaire on a computer, with access to the Internet, sometime during an expressed time interval, e.g. between the 1st and the 15th of May.

Important aspects

- The use of the *Questionnaire Concerning Attractive Work* provides a point of departure for the Attractive Work Process. There are several advantages to using the questionnaire. It is an efficient way to gather opinions from everybody. It is also supposed to make employees feel engaged and motivated and to feel that, that their opinions matter.
- It is important to handle the questionnaires in a way that makes the employees feel secure that the results cannot be traced back to specific individuals. Information should be given on how the data is to be analyzed and presented.
- A challenging part is to get everybody to complete the questionnaire. Information should be given about the importance of gathering everybody's opinions in order to get representative results. The questionnaire is extensive and people who are not used to reading or not so familiar with the language may find it tiring. Some may need more time and others can be helped by someone reading the questions for them.
- The presence of the process leader who gives information and is available to answer questions is also desirable.
- The web-based version may be advantageous if it is difficult to gather the staff at one time.

Analyze results

When the questionnaires are completed it is time to process the answers and analyze them. First, the data from the questionnaire should be transferred to a data file. The transfer is automatic with the web-based version.

The data can be analyzed and presented in different graphic forms. Which ones to choose depend on the aim and objective of the company. The decision depends on how, when and to whom the results

are to be presented, i.e., if it is the results from the whole company or from different working groups.

The amount of data is so big that a strategy is necessary. It is not possible to present all the data on one occasion. One way is to start with two diagrams, one with the qualities which were valued to be most important to make a job attractive, and the second showing the qualities which reflect the biggest difference between the current job and the qualities' importance. Further analysis of the data can be done after the first presentation of the results.

The diagram showing the qualities with the biggest difference between the current job and the qualities' importance is named "prioritized areas". Prioritized areas are seen as areas that are important to develop to raise the attractiveness of the work. When selecting areas, not only is the difference between the current job and importance of making a job attractive important, but the importance of the quality has to be considered. The more important a quality is, the more urgent its fulfilment in the current job. The formula $Priority = Attractiveness \times (Attractiveness - Current\ job)$ has been developed to identify areas prioritized for development. Prioritized qualities are those with highest *Priority*. See figure 1 for an example of one spider diagram.

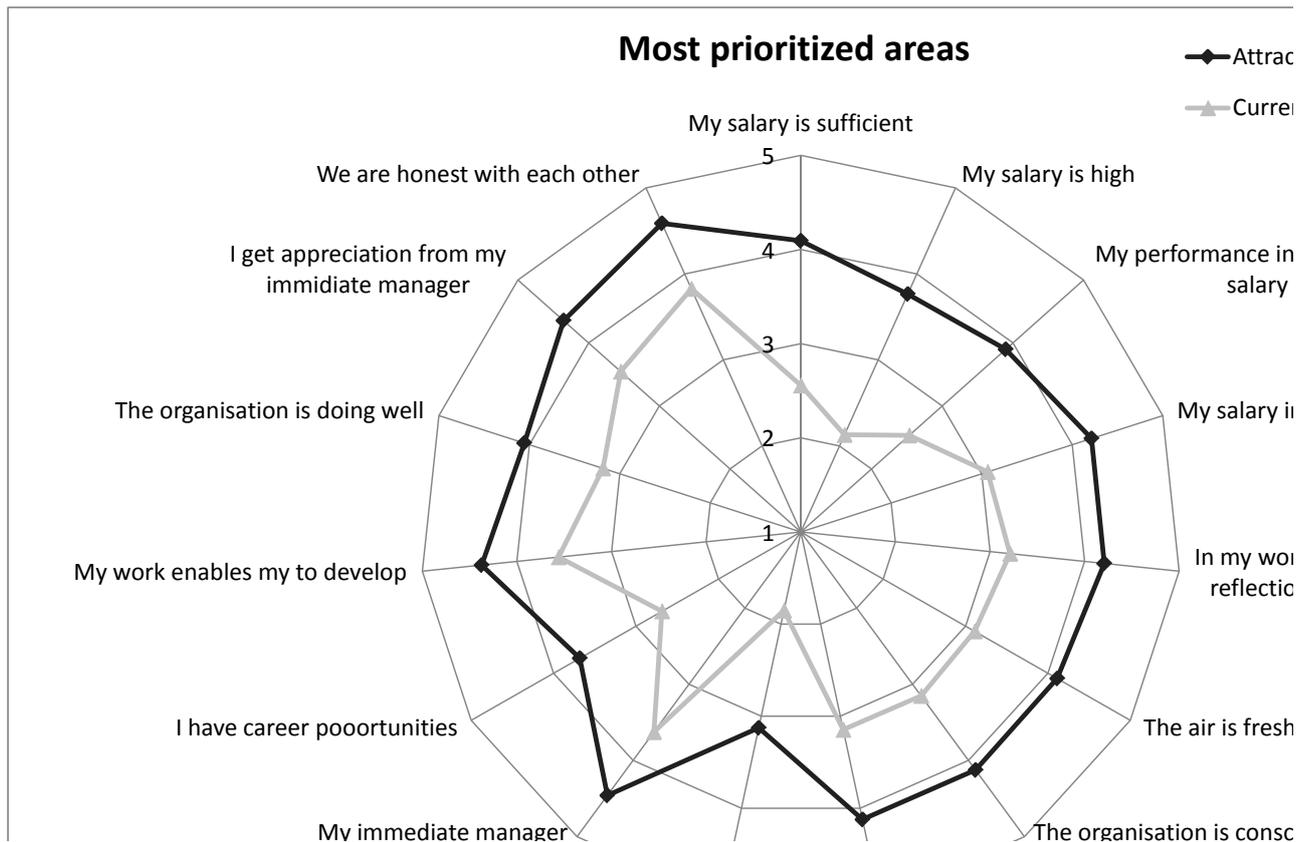


Figure 1. An example of a spider diagram showing prioritized areas based on the formula

$$Priority = Attractiveness \times (Attractiveness - Current\ job).$$

Important aspects

- One of the biggest advantages of the *Questionnaire Concerning Attractive Work* is that it gives an overall picture of employees' opinions about their job situation. The statements in the questionnaire make it possible for employees to put words and concepts to their experiences. The amount of information is big, and a strategy is needed to select what to present and in which form.
- It is a good idea to select only a few diagrams with some of the qualities at the start. Showing about 15 qualities in a diagram makes it possible for the employees to grasp the information. For example, qualities that are related to each other can be identified. Further diagrams can be made later in the process when they are requested. It is important to

stimulate employees' motivation and engagement and let them be the ones to identify what they are interested in learning more about.

- Visualization of the results is appreciated. The diagrams should be distinct with a clear title and descriptions of the curves and always the same colours for the same curve (e.g. red for attractive qualities and blue for the current job), and a font size that makes it possible to read the statements (see figure 1).

Report results and prioritize

The fourth step of the process starts with the presentation of the results. In some companies, the management want to see the presentation before it is given to the employees. All employees should be invited to a meeting which will take about 3-4 hours. If it is a large workplace meetings within different working groups are an option.

The meeting is characterized by dialogue and there should be a process leader who is well prepared. Knowledge of the Attractive Work Model, as well as the skills to lead a dialogue and an attitude that encourages participation from everybody is also preferable. The process leader should be familiar with the results and have some knowledge about actual workplace.

First, a short presentation of the process at the company should be given, and then is it time to present the results. The attendees should be invited to participate during the meeting. The presentation of results can be divided into three parts: background questions, important qualities and prioritized qualities.

Diagrams of the background questions – “How important is work to you?”, “What is the main reason for working?” and “To what extent do you consider your current job attractive?” – are shown. Then the participants should discuss how they perceive the results. The aim is that they start thinking about their job and its importance.

After that, the 15 qualities that the employees found most important for a job to be attractive should be shown. The diagram should be explained and a copy of it should be handed out to everyone. The participants should be divided into small groups and reflect over the diagram together. They should discuss and write down what they think promotes the attractiveness of the different aspects of their workplace. Each group should present and share with the other groups their opinions on what they think promotes each quality.

The last part is to present a diagram with the 15 most prioritized qualities. The participants then discuss and share their opinions once again.

Important aspects

- It is important that the process leader is well prepared and focused on her/his role. The process leader should lead the dialogue and not contribute her/his opinion to the results.
- Letting the employees go through the results should increase their awareness of Attractive Work. The dialogue gives them the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions.
- It is important to raise the promoting perspective¹, otherwise there is a large risk that people will blame each other and only see problems. One way to promote is to ask the employees what they think can be done so their current job approaches the attractive one. Another way is to ask the employees to discuss what in their current job supports the most important qualities.

Action plan

In the fifth step the thoughts from the employees should be converted into concrete activities. One way to do this is to write an action plan. Some activities can be done immediately, while others require a longer perspective.

Promoting thoughts and ideas should inspire concrete activities. Each small group chooses some of their earlier presented promoting aspects for analysis. Concrete activities that can be undertaken at the company to raise attractiveness should be developed. The suggestions will be presented to the whole group of employees and actions will be written down in a common action plan. The action plan should include what should be done, why should it be done, how should it be done, who is responsible, and when should it be done. This document will be the basis for later follow-up and evaluation.

In a bigger company with several working groups, there can be a need to gather suggestions that are common to the whole company before action can be taken. The action plan should describe the process to ensure that it will continue and that positive change occurs.

Important aspects

- When working on the action plan is it good to divide the employees into smaller groups. That gives everybody the opportunity to mention their opinions and thoughts. Sometimes it is good to mix employees from different work groups. The mix of people can make it easier to think in new ways. The employees will then bring their “new” thinking back to their ordinary work groups. All ideas are taken into account.
- The employees themselves should make the decision about what to focus on and how to proceed. When employees are creating the action plan it is important that the process leader raise the question “What can you start with, in your own work team?” This gives them the opportunity and responsibility to take actions themselves. Another advantage is to start with simple actions that can be included in the ordinary work routines without large investments.
- The realization of the action plan should start as soon as possible. Immediate activities will allow the employees to see that something is happening and that the process is going forth.

Measure/evaluate

A variety of things can be done to carry out the action plan and keep the process alive. The action plan should be on the agenda for regular employee meetings. Follow-up should be done on all activities and new ones should be made when necessary. That will show that the process is prioritized and everybody will continuously be reminded of it.

Another thing is to make records of measurement summarizing the actions: ten points for completed actions, five points for actions which have been started and zero points for those which are not performed. Measurements should be performed regularly and the results should be presented to everyone in graphic format.

At least one day per year can be set aside for the work teams to focus on work attractiveness.

A summary evaluation of performed activities should be completed once a year and be presented to all employees.

Important aspects

- To effectively raise attractiveness, it is important to make sure that an action plan is prepared. If the process stops, there is a big risk of the opposite effect, i.e. the jobs will become less attractive.
- Follow-up studies are helpful to work through the action plan and continue to develop the attractiveness of the workplace. Decisions have to be taken about when and how follow-ups should be done.
- Activities that have been completed should be mentioned and the results should be made visible to all participants.

General important aspects

The process is built on a promoting approach and engagement from all the employees. It is thereby important that the process leader's behaviour supports that approach. The promoting perspective raises possibilities and should provide the energy to take actions. Negative thinking should be avoided and problems should be set aside. Actions to keep and raise employees' motivation and engagement are needed throughout process. Information should be continuously provided.

It takes time to make changes. Small steps in the right direction keep the process moving forward. It is necessary to let the changes take time so as many employees as possible are aware of and understand the process. Many small steps also give more employees the opportunity to actually take part in the actions, and are often easier to plan.

In order to make the process continuous it must be "living" all the time. Continuation depends on how the six steps of the process have developed. One way is to conduct further discussions based on the first results collected from the survey. Another is to take a new measurement and begin again.

Results and discussion

The method of the Attractive Work Process is continuously developed. From the description above it is easy to understand that the process is dynamic. It will take different forms depending on the company, the employees and the process leader. Some ways to handle important aspects have been identified from experiences during the development of the process. Descriptions from some cases will be presented and discussed.

Successful cases

Support from the manager before the start has been identified as important. The manager and the process leader must agree on expectations. A way to do that is to start with a strategic discussion, raising questions such as "What opportunities does the process offer?" and "What are the goals for the company?" Not only are the goals of the process interesting but so is the company's vision. One

manager said that the Attractive Work Process should be integrated into the company's strategy. It would offer greater understanding for why the process is taking place as well as make it easier to keep the process going.

It is challenging to get everybody to complete the questionnaire. It is a good idea to gather all the employees and give them time to do it on the same occasion. The most common ways have been to make time for it in combination with a regular personnel meeting, or in connection with lunch or a break in the work. One company did it as a special event. They arranged for a special activity, tasting different types of coffee, and completed the questionnaire at the same time. It was greatly appreciated by the employees.

As mentioned earlier, the process leader should plan the process together with a person or a group from the company. It has been successful to always have two people responsible for the process. These can be, for example, one person at the company and one external process leader. Most important, however, is that at least one of them is familiar with the process and one has knowledge in the actual business. As a tandem they can support each other in getting things done and discussing how to handle situations that arise during the process.

To have two people who are responsible is also necessary for the success of the goal of offering more attractive work. Several companies say that it is positive if the external process leader comes back to the company and asks about long-term effects. This creates positive pressure on the company to keep the process alive. On that occasion the company can proudly present what they have done and also discuss further actions. Independent of external or internal process leaders, a long-term plan with follow-up and evaluation is needed.

Important areas

Many important aspects of the process are described above. It is interesting to discuss the data from the questionnaire and the engagement of the employees from a methodological perspective.

With a goal of getting as many employees as possible to complete the questionnaire is it important that they have confidence in how the data will be handled. Therefore, it is important to provide information on how the data will be analyzed and presented. In the work with this process it has so far always been an external person, i.e. one not working at the company, who has gathered and summarized the results. In that way the possibility of identifying an individual's responses is low. If employees take on this task it can be difficult to maintain integrity. The presentation of the results is also of importance for integrity. A workplace with several working teams may want to present some results at the team level or by subgroups, e.g. men/women. Then is it important to have groups that are sufficiently large. A typical target is that there should be at least 5 people in each subgroup. The process is built on engagement from the employees. Because of that, the goal is to keep and raise the motivation and engagement of the employees during the whole process. Different ways to achieve that aim can be identified in the process. When starting up, information about the process is given to all employees. In that way employees are made aware of the process and feel included. Continuous information is given to maintain motivation. Another way to engage employees is to let everybody complete the questionnaire. People who are not present when the questionnaire is first completed should be given the opportunity to fill it in. Completing the questionnaire gives the employee a clearer feeling of participation. It also gives a signal that his/her opinions are valued. The employees also contribute their opinions in the discussion around the results and in the creation of the action plan. Everyone's participation is assumed to be supported by the dialogues and work in small groups. A final example is to request actions that can be done by the work group to raise attractiveness. Feedback from the companies shows that employees are motivated by and engaged in the process. Further research is needed to establish how motivation and engagement are supported and to what degree.

Conclusions

Success factors and problems

As mentioned, the Attractive Work Process has been developed continuously. According to changeable working conditions in today's working life and the basic idea that a high level of engagement on the part of the company and its employees forms the process, it will probably be further developed. In this paper the process, as well as important aspects of it, have been described. The basis is the researchers' interaction and discussions with participating companies and supporting service companies.

The Attractive Work Model is the basis for the process. The promoting perspective, and starting with an overall picture of the work situation have been successful. Focusing on the positive instead of looking for problems has been especially appreciated by company leaders. Despite the length of the questionnaire, response rates have been very high when using the paper version. That has likely been made possible by using the described method to gather all employees, as well as the presence of the process leader. It would be preferable if the number of questions could be decreased without losing the overall picture. A study has begun to investigate if that is possible.

The way that the steps in the process are performed is important. The process assumes engagement from the manager and the employees in a variety of ways. The success of the process seems, in large part, to be dependent on the process leader's approach. It can be difficult for work environment consultants and occupational health care companies to take the role of process leader if they are not used to working in that way.

Transferability

The process has been developed by researchers during interactive research projects with SMEs. In order to make the process available to more companies, one-day courses about the method have been given to supporting service companies on two occasions. The supporting service companies that participated found these courses valuable. Some of them have used the method and others are

marketing it to companies.² So far the process has only been used in Sweden, and the material is in Swedish.

The *Questionnaire Concerning Attractive Work* was produced in Swedish on paper. The questionnaire has been translated into English by Högskolan Dalarna, and, in cooperation with international colleagues, to Finnish and Dutch as well. Further collaboration is planned to study the similarities and differences between countries. In order to make it easier to manage the questionnaire, a web-based version has been developed.

Expected effectiveness and impact of the interventions

Each company formulates their own goals for the Attractive Work Process. One commonality so far is that the companies want to work with their human resources. They want to take actions toward more attractive work so employees will stay at their jobs and be engaged. This is expected to lead to increased competitiveness for companies. In any case, it is not easy to isolate the Attractive Work Process and evaluate whether it has contributed to more attractive work. Our experiences so far offer some indicators that the process is successful:

- Some companies which have gone through the process want to do it again.
- The process itself engages the employees, which is one part of the definition of Attractive Work.
- Some companies have expressed that they are very satisfied with the Attractive Work Process.

¹ A promoting perspective can here be described as when an area in need of development has been identified, the focus on what the goal is and how it can be reached, not on what has gone wrong before and who is to blame.

² For more information about the evaluation of support and education around methods and processes for more attractive work to supporting service companies, see Hedlund & Pontén (2009) *Supporting service companies*. Paper USE2009.

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