

Social innovations – new solutions for an inclusive working life

Malin Lindberg, Professor of Gender and Technology, Luleå University of Technology

Introduction

This article discusses how an inclusive working life may be enforced by social innovations, in terms of new services, products, methods, organizations, etc. that aim for societal benefit and social change.¹ Social innovations may seek to improve the wellbeing and empowerment in various societal areas, such as working life, education or health. A practical example of a social innovation is The Swedish Leisure Bank (Fritidsbanken)², which lends reused sports and leisure equipment free of charge, in order to promote healthy lifestyles, sustainable consumption and work opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Other examples are methods of reverse mentorship³ and young mentorship⁴, where immigrant women and young people act as mentors to professional managers, in order to challenge stereotypical conceptions of competence in the working life.

In policy, social innovation is promoted as a way to tackle complex societal challenges, such as unemployment, segregation, poverty, ill-health and migration. In the EU, social innovation is seen as a prerequisite for keeping welfare and labor market policy up to date with current societal trends. The European Social Fund (ESF) is highlighted as a particularly important arena for development, testing and dissemination of social innovations for working life inclusion. In Sweden, ESF currently funds two projects managed by The Union for Professionals (Akademikerförbundet SSR)⁵. The projects promote universal design in the workplace, in terms of work organization, work environment and work supply that benefits a diversity of employees, regardless of their disabilities, age, gender, religion, language skills, etc.⁶ In this article, SSR's promotion of universal workplace design is analyzed in the light of previous studies of social innovation. The purpose is to advance the knowledge on social innovation aspirations and strategies in the promotion of an inclusive working life.

Aspirations and strategies in social innovation

Since the 2000s, the notion of innovation has been increasingly been linked to societal change, as innovative solutions to current societal challenges and the global sustainability goals in UN's 2030 Agenda are called for.⁷ Social innovation has consequently become a useful concept for

¹ cf. Howaldt et al. 2018, Moulaert et al. 2013

² www.fritidsbanken.se

³ www.esf.se/Resultat/Projektbanken/Behallare-for-projekt/Sydsverige/Omvant-Mentorskap

⁴ <https://computersweden.idg.se/2.2683/1.659320/unga-mentor-foretag>

⁵ SSR is a trade union for professionals with a university degree in social science or social work

⁶ <https://akademssr.se/UUA>

⁷ Howaldt et al. 2018, Westley et al. 2017

understanding and promoting organizational and societal renewal. In science, social innovation is now an established multidisciplinary research field, with a rapidly growing number of studies, publications, conferences and networks. Thousands of empirical examples of social innovations have been studied, in most parts of the world.⁸ Recurrent themes in these studies are health promotion, integration, urban and rural development, as well as working life inclusion. The most common actors in the studied examples are public and non-profit organizations, followed by private companies, individual citizens and academic institutions. Studies identify four general aspirations and strategies in social innovation, that regard *what* is developed, *where* it is developed, *why* it is developed and *how* it is developed. These are further elaborated below.

What is developed

What is developed concerns the form of the social innovation, which often is a new service, product, method, organization or partnership. In SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace, social innovations partly take the form of new methods for recruitment, that enable employers to attract and hire a more diverse workforce. Another example is new configurations of the physical work environment, that enable employees to work more flexibly, creatively or undisturbed. Studies reveal that the form of a social innovation has to be useful, accessible and meaningful for the target group in their everyday life and contexts. In order to achieve this, innovative combinations of different forms are often required. SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace combine, for example, new methods, courses, forums and collaborations for the renewal of work organization, work environment and work supply.

Where it is developed

Where it is developed concerns the type of context that is renewed through social innovation, which can be a specific location, area of operation or target group. The solution may thereby not be new to the whole world, but new in the local context where it is intended to create value. In SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace, the context that is renewed is workplaces with employees of varying age, gender, disabilities, religion, language skills, etc. In order for social innovations to create value for these workplaces and stakeholders, general solutions need to be transferred to multiple sites. Research reveals that the transfer of social innovation requires adaption to local conditions and needs, while upholding the original purpose and quality through some kind of standardization. SSR's projects address, for example, the challenge of transferring general principles of universal design to the everyday work-sites of employers and employees.

Why it is developed

Why it is developed concerns the motive for developing a social innovation. It may be a specific societal challenge that needs to be dealt with in new ways, in order to counteract social deprivation. SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace are, for example, motivated

⁸ Howaldt et al. 2018, Moulaert et al. 2013, Westley et al. 2017

Reference: Lindberg, M. (2020). Social innovations – new solutions for an inclusive working life. *Ratkes*, no. 2.

by the fact that many work organizations, work environments and work supply strategies tend to exclude some employees, due to their age, gender, disabilities, religion, language skills, etc. Studies expose that social innovation often challenge established views of causes and character of specific societal challenges. By acknowledging experiences and needs among disadvantaged groups, social innovations make it possible to address the root causes instead of merely the symptoms. SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace are, for example, based on a shift of perspective from individually customized solutions for disadvantaged individuals, to holistic solutions that works for a wide variety of employees.

How it is developed

How it is developed concerns the methods that are used to initiate, design, implement and transfer social innovations. A common method is to enhance simultaneous change at the individual, organizational and societal levels. This makes it possible to address the complexity of the focused societal challenge. SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace aspire, for example, improvements for *individuals* in terms of work opportunities and working environments that matches their needs and skills, for *organizations* in terms of skills supply and work organization that harness a wider variety of people and competences, as well as for the general *society* in terms of reduced economic and social costs for unemployment and ill-health among disadvantaged groups. Studies reveal that social innovation requires active involvement of stakeholders across intra-organizational and extra-organizational boundaries in all phases of the renewal process, in order to achieve sustainable change. SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace involve, for example, employees, employers, real estate companies, municipalities, national authorities and non-profit organizations in the development, testing and implementation of new solutions for an inclusive working life.

Conclusions

This article has discussed how an inclusive working life may be enforced by social innovation, based on previous studies and SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace. Four main aspirations and strategies are discerned, in terms of what is developed, where it is developed, why it is developed and how it is developed. The distinction of separated categories may be misleading, however, since the value of social innovation doesn't primarily arise from individual pieces, but from innovative interconnections between these in a comprehensive renewal process. This means that the form of the social innovation creates value when combined with its context, motivation and methods. Several knowledge gaps remain to be filled in social innovation studies, regarding how working life and other welfare-related areas can be renewed through such combinations. Insights and results from ongoing innovation processes, such as SSR's projects for universal design in the workplace, provide valuable input to such advancements of knowledge.

Reference: Lindberg, M. (2020). Social innovations – new solutions for an inclusive working life. *Ratkes*, no. 2.

References

Howaldt, J., Kaletka, C., Schröder, A., Zirngiebl, M. (2018). *Atlas of Social Innovation*. Dortmund: TU Dortmund University.

Moulaert, F., MacCallum, D., Mehmood, A., Hamdouch, A. (red.) (2013). *The international handbook on social innovation*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Westley, F., McGowan, K., Tjörnbo, O. (red.) (2017). *The evolution of social innovation*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Acknowledgements

The research was funded by The Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (Forte) and The European Social Fund. The article is a translated and revised version of this publication: Lindberg, M. (2019). Social innovation – nya lösningar för inkludering. I Johnson, M. (red.). *Skapa universella arbetsplatser*. Stockholm: Akademikerförbundet SSR.