



Employer Brand Opens up for a Gender Process Model

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ABSTRACT

Regardless of a long tradition of legislation, policymaking and practical achievements, the issues of gender equality and of the segregated labor market still remain a matter of concern in Sweden. This paper describes a collaborative process between a research project and an engineering enterprise. It describes the point of departure, based on the concept of employer brand, of a long-term change process and the different phases and activities during an intensive period 2009. The collaboration aimed to develop innovative methods, and to apply them in order to achieve increased gender awareness, and thereby to be able to retain and attract the best labor for tomorrow. Different approaches and methods as analogies, anecdotes, and pictures were used to nourish the process. Findings showed that the interactive process contributed to increased awareness. During the process the enterprise became more conscious of the potential of being a gender equal employer.

KEY WORDS

Action research / attractive work / employer brand / gender equality / process model.

Introduction

The access to human resources is a crucial factor in most cases of business development. Competent and effective personnel, sharing a common vision, is essential for a profitable long-term success. Signs of labor shortage were confirmed by the Swedish Public Employment Services (Arbetsmarknadsutsikter 2007, Ura 2006:4)¹ and *SME Barometer* (2007)². The reports stress that companies difficulties to find the right labor can become a hindrance for sustainable business and regional development. Reason for this negative prediction is found in the demographical changes (Nygren 2006) and migration of youngsters, in particular young females, from the rural areas to the bigger cities (Region Bergslagen, 2002, Euro Futures AB).

In international comparison, Sweden is often considered as a country that has succeeded to reach gender equality in work- and family-life contexts, and great changes have taken place both in society and in people's minds since the concept was introduced in the 1960s. Different approaches have been tried with various success to create a more equal and less segregated labor market, but even though both the concepts and the discussion have been updated in the last 50 years, there is still a long way to go. A lot of differences still remain between women and men regarding resources, influence, and career possibilities. The gender wage gap³, gendered segregation in work and education, and the hierarchic difference between the valued masculine and the devalued feminine have still not

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disappeared (SOU 1998:6; Gonäs, 2005; Heiskanen, 2006). The labor market is highly sex segregated both horizontally, which refers to the concentration of women and men in different types of jobs, and vertically, the concentration of women and men in different job-tasks and positions. One reason for the existing labor segregation can be found in the early exclusion of women from the labor market and from different social restrictions that made it difficult for women to achieve equal possibilities and rights with men (SOU 2004:43). Thanks to technical equipment very few jobs or tasks require specific physical characteristics or a particular sex. Still, this type of gender segregation remains. Its explanations can be found in deeply rooted traditions as well as in the daily construction of gender in both society and work life. Westberg (1996) states that the sexual division of labor is maintained through socialization, but, above all, through immanent pedagogy⁴. The conceptions about sexual division of labor are transferred to both sexes (Westberg 1996), and Gonäs (2005) highlights that, despite the need of women as labor force, they have not been given access to all parts and levels in the labor market. Within the technical field, one explanation identified by feminists is men's monopoly of technology development, a strategy to maintain their power, and women's lack of technological skills is described as an important cause for women's dependence on men (Wajzman, 2004). Men's interpretative prerogative when defining qualification is also used for keeping women from technical work (Gunnarsson, 1994; Abrahamsson and Gunnarsson, 2002). The phenomenon is described as "doorkeepers" advocating biological and/or socialized differences as arguments for not accepting women as co-workers. Some arguments used to constitute this resistance are physical strength, men's familiarity with mechanics, and willingness to take risks. This notion can be one of many answers to why the industry has such a low rate of female workers: approximately 20%⁵. The labor segregation is not only a matter of democracy for the individuals; it is also an economical issue that has negative effects for private-, business-, and public stakeholders.

Being gender equal is widely seen as positive and as an achievement that many organizations and businesses want to highlight. Both enterprises and individuals often believe themselves to comply with the expected level of gender equality. However, a close and thorough examination often shows a gap between discourse and practice. The way organizations interpret the legislative requirements, they might fulfill them, thus achieving a hygiene level for political correctness. Therefore, it is a difficult and challenging task to start discussions about equality and the invisible influence of masculine dominance in the industrial sector.

In a Nordic context, stressing the necessity for both women and men to contribute and to take part in paid work, as well as in unpaid domestic work and care, has contributed to the strong tradition of gender research. There is a tradition of policy driven, demand based research, projects funded by the state through different research organizations. This tradition of feminist research, expected to deliver a great deal of *usefulness*, struggles with similar valid problems as the field of action research. The demand for participatory research at workplaces has resulted in a social robust knowledge based on joint knowledge production with practitioners⁶ in different fields (Gunnarsson 2006). Many of the Swedish and European research granters expect multiple stakeholders to be involved in order to fund research projects. This reality, combined with the increased demand for practically applicable gender projects and the common denominators: knowledge, democracy and change, becomes a good platform for merging the two traditions of science. From different perspectives, but with similar epistemology, both

traditions emphasize the necessity to move from a partial “exclusive limited area” to an “inclusive extended arena” for knowledge production (Gunnarsson 2007a). This project will combine the action research approach with gender theories.

Purpose and disposition

The purpose with this contribution is to describe and analyze a process model for gender awareness based on giving all the employees an introduction to the concept of *Doing Gender* and attractive work. A process developed in collaboration between an interactive oriented gender project and an engineering enterprise with a desire to become a more gender aware and attractive employer in order to attract employees regardless of sex.

The paper will describe how researcher and practitioners cooperate for production of contextualized knowledge useful for both parties. It will cover different theories and actions all integrated for a sustainable purpose. A short description of the framework and the used methods will be followed by the joint actions taken during the process and the steps in the process. An interactive process emerged during the collaboration suited to the context of the enterprise. The contribution ends with a discussion followed by some concluding reflections.

In order to fulfill the different demands and wishes for usefulness, and in order to contribute to a sustainable change process in a company the project team, inspired by successful projects/processes such as Learning by Fighting⁷ (Gunnarsson, Westberg, Andersson and Balkmar 2007b) and the Fiber Optic Valley gender project⁸ (Andersson, Amundsdotter, Svensson, 2008; 2009) among other former and contemporary projects⁹, felt that action research, and related methods with a clear gender perspective, (“doing gender” and “point of entry”) would be the best approach. An approach used in both Learning by Fighting and in the Fiber Optic Valley projects, but in contrast to these mentioned projects this project was directed to one company during a short period (approximately one year) and with the ambition to engage all employees in the change process. Another early standpoint for the project was neither to do research about gender equality nor to do research on a company. The research was *for* equality *with* a company.

When planning the project and arguing for companies to participate in this collaborative learning process on increased awareness regarding gender and equality in workplaces, the project team often met diffuse, but polite resistance. Many projects, both with and without a gender perspective, have been launched with the purpose to counteract the upcoming labor shortage. However, in this case the discharging concept, in the attempts to find a partner for collaboration, was neither gender equality nor segregation; it was the concept of employer brand. The fundamental logic presented by the project team was that a more gender equal workplace also would be perceived as a more attractive workplace.

Framework for the Process

Employer Brand

The decisive discourse for collaboration was the use of the concept *employer branding* introduced in the middle of the 1990s. Sullivan (2004) defines the concept as “a targeted,



long-term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm". According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), "the term employer branding suggests the differentiation of a firm's characteristics as an employer from those of its competitors. The employment brand highlights the unique aspects of the firm's employment offerings or environment" (p 502). Parment and Dyhre (2009) claims that the most essential factor in strengthening an employer brand, and to position the organization uniquely, is to define and develop the *employer value proposition*, EVP: the working conditions offered to the current and future employees. In order to find and develop the EVP the project believes that efforts for becoming a more gender aware employer with gender aware personal can be one strategy in the process of building the employer brand, "an identifiable and unique employer identity" (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004, p 502).

Gender

In social science, gender refers to the socially constructed roles that a society consider appropriate for men and women. Gender is an interaction going on between individuals and has to be seen as a process or relationship. When West and Zimmerman published their article "Doing Gender" (1987) they put the finger on a theme that, in different variations, has emerged in feminist theory on sex/gender in the second half of the 1900s. The concept of "doing gender" can be used to explain what is happening in practice within a company. It can be seen as an ongoing activity and interactive action made between men and women, between men and between women (Gunnarsson et al. 2007b). Although gender patterns vary between different societies, sectors and organizations there are enough similarities to make general statements about organizations in the rich Northern nations. Despite societal and organizational changes as ongoing development the sex typing and segregation persist, e.g. men dominating the field of engineering and skilled blue-collar occupations. To understand the reproduction of these patterns it is necessary to look at organizations and their internal processes (Acker 1999, p 179). Awareness of "doing gender" on a structural level can also contribute to a better understanding of the construction of gender in everyday life.

For the participating enterprise the vision was to become a more attractive employer, to develop a stronger employer brand. In this contribution we addressed the concept of "doing gender" as an ongoing process for a change of norm and discourse, and as a strategy for gaining increased gender equality within the enterprise.

Most change processes will at some point meet resistance and hesitation. Amundsdotter (2009) describes different kinds of resistance, i.e. refutation as power strategies. She highlights three dimensions: the fear of being declared hysterical or crazy, the fear of losing one's position, and the fear to face opposition. Regarding position, Hearn (2001) states that men benefit from living in a patriarchal society and that it is difficult to identify men's general interest in gender equality. Men's practices and attitudes are obstacles for women's equality. With this in mind, to start change processes for more attractive work, partly based on gender discussions, can be considered as a hazardous adventure. On the other hand, in the article "Why Men Should Support Gender Equity" Kimmel (2005) states that men will gain benefits from a more equal society. He argues that:

We need these men to demand parental leave, we need policies that encourage and support it, and we need to change the culture of our organizations to support men taking parental leave – because ONLY when men share housework and child care, can we have the kinds of lives we say we want to have, and ONLY when men share house work and childcare will women be able to balance work and family, be able to have it all. This, it seems to me, is the promise of gender mainstreaming (p 113).

He also claims that feminism is important because it promotes an examination not only of ourselves, but also of the interactions and institutions in which men participate. Examination will make men understand these interactions and institutions as organized by power. For examination the four different “points of entry” or perspectives defined by Acker (1999, p 180–185) can then be useful as pathfinder in the discussion for increased gender awareness¹⁰:

1. Procedures, activities, divisions.
2. Images, Symbols, Forms of Consciousness.
3. Interaction Between Individuals and Groups.
4. Internal Mental Work.

This strategy has been proven to be successful in earlier interventions (Gunnarsson et al. 2007b; Andersson et al. 2008), and will be used as a frame for forthcoming workshops.

Action Research

When planning the project the theoretical framework of action research was found to be most suitable for the purpose to develop methods and practice for sustainable gender awareness. For an overview of the field of action research see Aagaard Nielsen and Svensson (2006). Lewin saw the researcher’s influence as something productive in the knowledge production process, and in interactive research the “joint learning” during a project is stressed. Compared with the tradition in interactive research, action research goes a step further and calls for a component of action to support a normative change in some direction. Drewes Nielsen (2006) states that the demand for action-oriented research can be found in the need of methods able to handle the complexity and insecurity in the society of today, in the need of a democratic dialogue among the stakeholder in developing processes, and finally in the need for researchers and other actors to produce knowledge and change together. In the mutual exchange between researcher and practitioner, the produced knowledge should be of practical relevance and of high scientific standard. Aagaard Nielsen and Svensson (2006) stress that the field of action research is not seen as a collection of principles with distinct theories and methods. It is based on a number of different theories and methods used depending on the context and has a more pragmatic perspective where knowledge and change are created in collaborative action with practitioners. The researchers see themselves as co-producers in the creation of new knowledge without being in a privileged position in this joint learning process. Consequently, to establish this cooperation the researcher can neither take a position of being a fly-on-the-wall, objectively observing what is happening, nor take a position



were she/he approaches as “the righteous missionary” redeeming the crowd (Tranquist, 2008, p 303). The researcher has to be aware of how her or his presence influences the research. Since an aim for the researchers and practitioners is to alter the course of events, and also to generate new knowledge from the change, it is important to create arenas for interactions that allow the participants and researchers to share knowledge and experiences (Aagaard Nielsen and Svensson, 2006).

In previous section different research fields, employer brand, “doing gender” and action research have briefly been described so as to be able to develop a process-model that will contribute to a more attractive work.

Process

Partners

Triple Steelix¹¹ is an organization with the mission to “with steel as the base – promote increased development and growth in the region of Bergslagen¹²”. Within this mission Triple Steelix manages the research project GATT¹³, financed by VINNOVA¹⁴ within the program Needs-Driven Gender Research for Innovation. In the beginning, the project was looking for companies with a genuine motivation to work on a long-term basis with gender perspectives for developing a more equal and attractive work, irrespective of gender. Due to the global financial crisis, in the fall of 2008, it was not easy to find suitable partners, but after an evening gathering with volunteers discussing the concept of employer brand the HR manager at a company and one of the researchers in the project started to discuss openings for cooperation. Prior to this event the company had recognized the need for decisive action in order to meet future challenges, partly because of the expansion, but also as a preventive measure to meet demographic progress with expected difficulties in recruiting the right employees. The concept of employer brand was the point of departure for the collaboration between the company and the researchers.

Two researchers from the project, an associate professor, female, with a long experience from gender research and fieldwork in collaboration with engineering enterprises, and a male PhD student, with extensive experience in business and project development, collaborated with the company’s staff during 2009. Based upon her long experience from feminist action research the associate professor’s role was to support and guide the PhD student in action planning and in his role as a facilitator during the change process and workshops. With a degree in mechanical engineering and several years in the engineering field, the male facilitator was familiar with activities within engineering companies, both in terms of production and commercial requirements. As a man, father, earlier not reflecting on gender roles or order, and being part of the hegemonic masculinity forming the norm in the Swedish society, he nevertheless had an understanding of the tension that exists around the gender equality debate. When entering the collaboration these personal experiences contributed to a wider understanding of the complexity and the resistance that exists when sex and gender equality are discussed.

Dellner Couplers AB is an expanding engineering company that manufactures, sells, and maintains industrial products for a global market. The headquarters with corporate management, development department, and production of certain goods is located in a semi rural area 250 km from Stockholm. Production facilities are also located in

Poland, USA, India, and China; sales and service organizations are found in several other countries. The annual total turnover for the entire enterprise is close to 100 million USD. Total number of employees worldwide is 500 people.

Despite the mobility of young, well-educated labor and the attraction that cities can have, the managing team had, due to the company's history since 1941, decided to keep the headquarters in Vika, even though the location in Vika could be seen as an obstacle when expanding.

In order to counter this, the company wanted to build a better reputation on the labor market, become more attractive and strengthen their employer brand. Seen historically, the company has however been quick to lay off in crisis, something that can affect the reputation of the company as a stable and attractive employer. When launching the collaboration 2009, the plant in Sweden had 180 staff members, 75% men, and 25% women (a total of 45), and the average age was 40 years. Among the employed women two-thirds (30) were office workers with administrative duties and one-third worked within production. In business management there were six men and one woman. With a total of 25 persons in middle management, 21 were men and 4 women. The proportion of women in managing position was thus 19%.

Launching

The female HR manager, who became the key- and contact- person for the project, had been working at the company for about two years when the collaboration started. She was responsible for IT strategies, communication, recruitment, and the ambitious transforming process decided by the Board of Management. For the partnership, her mandate and motivation were crucial. When jointly forming the process plan the male researcher used analogies to explain the logic with comparing strategies for example product brand versus employer brand, in order to create mutual understanding. After a consensus was reached with the HR manager on desired processes and methods, company management approved the collaboration and the HR manager was given the mandate to get the intervention started. The *preliminary agreement* process plan was documented as a logical model (logical framework) describing the theoretical causality between inputs (resources) and outcomes (results and effects). The model can be used as support in evaluation, planning, management, monitoring, and communication of activities. It serves as a mediator providing an overview as well as creating the conditions for participation in and understanding of the process and its expected results (Annemalm and Bergling, 2007). In this case the documentation was just used for describing the joint intention of the process.

Questionnaire

A good start for a long-term change process concerning the conditions in a workplace is to identify the opinion of the employees, regarding qualities that contribute to an attractive work and how the employees perceive their current job. The research team, Theme Working Life, at Högskolan Dalarna has developed a questionnaire (*att-questionnaire*) based on a model (Åteg, Hedlund and Pontén 2004) that describes the qualities of an



attractive job. It was developed with a supposedly gender neutral approach and does not address the gender dimension, but has proved to be a useful tool to start discussions on the subject of work situations. Another argument is that many people depend on “measured facts” as a take off point, and then a questionnaire can be a complementary tool.

After informing all the staff, through intranet, orally at a general assembly, and through a special bulletin board, about the planned interaction the *att-questionnaire* was launched. All employees were encouraged to answer. Still, participation was optional. In order to increase the numbers of respondents the employees were given two optional media and could answer via a web-based version or in paper form. The questions were identical regardless of media, and all responses were entered into the same database. Since the company was well organized and divided into functional groups it was practical to use the same structure to allocate the respondents into groups, in which they would later discuss and give suggestions for improvements during the feedback process. A dedicated computer was placed in the lunchroom for answering the web-based survey. The employees were given access for answering the “*att-questionnaire*” during a two-week period to begin with. The first results of the survey came at the end of May 2009. By then only 103 persons had responded to the questionnaire, which was regarded to be too few, since merely 58% had responded. The measurement period was extended two weeks more in order to increase the proportion of respondents. In the middle of June 130 persons (72%) had answered the *att-questionnaire*, an acceptable response frequency.

Between the two answering periods, the anchoring process continued with an internal leadership conference, where the researchers described the project, its process steps, aims, and the desired results for a group of 20 of a total of 25 middle managers. This gave the managers an opportunity to discuss specific questions with the male researcher, but also an opportunity for the researchers to stress the importance to inspire the rest of the staff to answer the *att-questionnaire*. In connection with the meeting an extra questionnaire was handed out with general questions about gender equality. The purpose of this action was to introduce the ideas of gender equality to the supervisors, and to get a hint of to what extent they reflected on the differences in employment for men and women.

Workshops

Information, anchoring, and answering the questionnaire about attractive work was the first step of the process. The second step was to inform and reflect over the results from the questionnaire with the employees in workshops, and add a gender perspective. The workshops started in September 2009 after the summer vacations and were implemented during the fall. All employees were invited to attend the workshops. In total 13 workshops were conducted with between 4 and 22 participants in each, covering approximately a total of 130 persons. A parish house close to the plant was used for the workshops 10 out of 13 times.

Being aware of the reaction gender discussions can cause, the researchers were in the beginning very humble and kept a low profile the first three workshop occasions. The combination of integrating the result from the questionnaire with discussions about the influence of gender was a new approach, never tried before. When the researchers,

after the second workshop, reflected on the implemented process they felt that they had not accomplish the aim to create a reflective dialogue with the participants. This also caused a reaction from one of the participating managers who protested after the third workshop, and criticized the approach regarding the issue of gender to be too modest and cowardly. Due to this critique, the design of the workshops was dramatically rearranged and became more specific and challenging. The male researcher started to use pictures, anecdotes, and provocative arguments to contribute to a more active interaction, and thereby a more efficient learning process.

Hee Pedersen (2008) indicates the usefulness of pictures and describes good experiences from merging action research, gender theory, and pictures as methods in transformation projects. Pictures transform abstract and complex feelings, opinions, experiences, concerns, attitudes, and worries into tangible objects the practitioners actually can talk about, explain, and expand. Images have a broader and more open content than single words. From her research Hee Pedersen concludes that inclusion of pictorial material is a useful way to develop poststructuralist thinking technologies to further expand our understandings of the complexities of communication in individual as well as collective sense-making. In order to create understanding, in a dialogue between designer and client about planned target image, Ullmark (2007) recommends the use of analogies, which can be used as an eye opener to explain complex matters. Analogies to the past, to other firms or industries, and to other competitive settings like sports or war are useful in strategy discussions (Gavetti, Levinthal and Rivkin, 2005). Coro and Taylor (2007) promote the use of analogy when a complex technology is explained as a strategy to get prospects to comprehend a unique offer. In this context the concept of doing gender is the complex issue to explain.

An additional strategy that can be used in an action research process is the use of anecdotes, e.g. based upon personal experience from life. Anecdotes or storytelling can be seen as knowledge sharing stories, that if well designed, well-told, can help others learn from past situations to respond in future situations (Sole, D. 2002). This can contribute to a more open atmosphere encouraging the exchange of thoughts, if handled with care.

Workshop 4 to 13 was divided in three phases

The new structure of the workshop was divided into three phases: introduction, “doing gender”, and, finally the presentation of the results from the *att-questionnaire* including discussions regarding suggestions for improvements to be done for a more attractive work, action lists.

The first phase of the workshop included socialization, presentation of the two researchers and their different roles in the process, information about the project and the financier VINNOVA. The participants were also given a brief description of why the enterprise and the project cooperated, and what kind of benefits each actor (company/researcher) expected to gain through the partnership. The interactive approach was also explained: that researcher and participants in dialogue jointly should develop common knowledge. Furthermore, the participants were given a description of how the questionnaire had been developed, as well as of the methods and tools that would be used during the workshop.



The second phase in the workshop was to initiate reflective discussion on social construction of gender. The goal for this process was to raise awareness about how gender is constructed in our daily lives and how this may affect the perceived attractiveness of the workplace. As the discussion about sex and gender often results in feelings of guilt and accusation, mostly among men, the researcher emphasized that this was not the intention of the presentation. Most of the times the declaration of aim did not meet any protests but at one occasion a male participant protested and said: "Is this some stupid feminist initiative?". But at the end of the workshop the subject was not so uncomfortable for him. In order to de-dramatize the discussion and to create an open and permissive climate, the male researcher used his own personal experiences from life as a husband, father, and professional in different types of businesses. He explained how he always considered himself as a caring father and an understanding husband, but also how he could remember argumentations about parental leave and domestic work versus work on the house or in the garden. The used examples were based on a life as a gender blind, non-reflective man, and the participants were asked to give feedback and comments from their own experiences. Depending on the group's level of openness, the researcher used provocative analogies to start discussions. An example of discussed topics was whether different steel qualities are used in razor blades for males and females, within the same price range: Mach 3 versus Ladyshave, and if so, why? One man insisted that there was a difference, and he knew this from his own experience: "I use Ladyshave because I find it better". On another occasion, one man presented an opposite view, also based on self-experience. Another example of provocative questions was if any of the attendants knew why the insurance premium is higher for a young male compared to a female of the same age. Usually, often after a joke, someone explained it was due to the higher risk for young males to be involved in accidents. The analogy would then be connected to the question: "Who will most often use new technical investments, for example an advanced numerically controlled machine?" Most the time this provocative analogy started a short discussion and gave the workshop participants an opportunity to reflect upon how males more often are taken for granted as operators when new technology is introduced. A man from the maintenance department stated that he "...considered women to be more cautious with the machinery than the men", a comment another man questioned by saying: "Why just go 80 when you can do 120?" The dispute was followed by a short discussion about gender, productivity, and risks.

In the relaxed atmosphere the participants opened up and gave both positive and negative examples from the workplace. Yet, it was only on few occasions that these stories related to gender issues or construction of gender: Once a female worker expressed that "... it seemed like the guys get cordless telephones, mobile phones and PowerBooks, whether they need it or not...". After one of the workshops, a man told the story of his first summer job back in the 1960s: the women had lower wages, despite the same tasks, a situation that he considered unfair.

The final phase, presentation of the results from the *att-questionnaire*, was divided into three steps. In the first step, an overhead picture was shown on a screen and copies of the picture were distributed. It described a graph, based on the group's answers on the *att-questionnaire*, with both the 15 most valued qualities for a work to be perceived attractive and the value of how the group estimated their current jobs. After a brief explanation the attendants were divided into "beehives" to discuss and write down suggestions of activities to maintain or achieve those prioritized qualities. The

discussion was combined with a coffee break. In the second step, the qualities with the greatest discrepancy between desired and experienced work conditions were presented. The groups were again asked to discuss the result and write down suggestions on what measures that might be taken in order to reduce the gap. Phase three was completed by letting the groups discuss a short, additional questionnaire concerning whether there is a difference in the views of work and work conditions between men and women. Before completion of the workshop, the researcher asked the participants “What was this like?” in order to get spontaneously feedback regarding the content and methods. One young man commented that “...it gave me a new perspective”, his partner who was working at the same department was at the time on parental leave to take care of their child.

Follow-up/Feedback

Half a year after the last workshop was conducted with the managing board, the researchers started to work with a group of volunteers from the enterprise. The purpose for this collaboration was to deepen the understanding of gender, but it also gave the researchers the opportunity take part of the experiences from earlier actions. Later the same year (2010) the male researcher met the HR manager for an interview to get her impressions and experiences from the collaborative practice. It was an open interview, discussing: What have you learned from our collaboration? Was the process of use? And can you give any examples of results for the enterprise?

Result from the joint action

The small questionnaire addressed to the supervisors gave the researchers some indications regarding the current awareness of gender equality and work life issues. The result showed heterogeneous knowledge about current legislation and awareness on gender issues. Among the managers as many as 79% believed that the labor market is gender segregated and a majority of the ones arguing for this standpoint believed it was due to cultural norms. Moreover, 61% of the responders believed that jobs and/or job tasks are associated with a specific gender.

To handle the complexity of the change process, a democratic dialogue (Drewes Nielsen, 2006), all employees were invited to first express their opinion in the *att-questionnaire* and then join the workshops. In total 130 (72%) persons answered the questionnaire and about two thirds of all employees were participating during the fall of 2009. They got feedback from the result of the *att-questionnaire* and most of them got an introduction to the concept of *doing gender*, the importance of gender equality and time for reflection about their work conditions at the plant. All participants were asked to express their own thoughts, opinions and suggestions how to improve the enterprise to become a more attractive employer. After the final workshop the enterprise had 147 written suggestions how to develop the company. A majority of the suggestions were about leadership, physical work conditions, acknowledgement (feedback), and relations. The managing team was aware of the shortcomings concerning the physical conditions, since many of the premises were inadequate.



One qualitative result of increased awareness regarding gender issues was demonstrated when an architect was later given the assignment to propose an extension of the building. When the architect submitted the first draft of the extension the management noticed that the locker room for female employees was much smaller than the locker room for men. Since the management did not want to get caught in old structures the new proposal had a movable wall between the two sections.

Another result and sign of awareness was noticed when the enterprise started the process of developing a new website, with a sub-directory for job advertisements. The HR manager now emphasized the importance for the subcontractor to be aware of gender equality aspects when designing the website since they now were eager that the layout would be appealing regardless of the visitor's sex. This is an important alertness since the page for job advertisements communicates a first impression of the company to applicants (Parment and Dyhre, 2009).

In order to maintain the increased awareness regarding gender equality a number of employees (a gender group) were permitted to voluntarily participate in a series of seminars giving them more inspiration and knowledge about "doing gender", so as to become more gender aware. The purpose was to secure the sustainability of the new knowledge and attention regarding gender as a potential and positive component for building a stronger employer brand. The group was given the mission to present a new policy plan regarding gender equality at the company. When the researchers and this group after the main process cooperated, additional reactions revealed that also can be seen as result of the former process. For example, at one occasion a woman declared her conclusion that "it's not about gender, it's about power", which started a good discussion related to the gender system, men as the norm and the suppression of women. One man expressed his appreciation saying "it's good to broaden the blinders", and at another occasion a woman expressed her frustration: "I do not know if I manage more gender perspective". This spontaneously expressed feeling gave nourishment to wider and deeper discussions in the group.

When asking the HR manager what they had learned from the collaboration the answer was that, as an employer, it is important to be courageous and daring to ask co-workers about what is considered important when choosing the place of work. Due to problems in the past they had been nervous before the results from the questionnaire came: "I was most afraid that we would not be able to take care of the result afterwards...". The collaboration gave the enterprise new experiences and knowledge for their journey to become a more attractive employer.

Discussion

The described collaborative process, carried through during almost an entire year, did not start, as hoped for, with a horde of eager enterprises wishing to participate. Finding an enterprise willing to invest time in an applied gender equality research project was harder than expected. It was not until the researchers listened to the companies' genuine needs and thoughts on future developments that collaboration could be initiated. The opening notion and point of departure for collaboration was the concept of *employer brand* (Sullivan 2004; Backhouse and Tikoo, 2004; Parment and Dyhre, 2009). This indicates the importance of both flexibility and of an open, humble attitude when

researchers strive for participatory joint knowledge production. Since the funding was dedicated for applied gender research, the framework of action research was considered the obvious choice as a theoretical platform. Different theories and methods were used depending on situation in order to reach both joint and individual objectives for the enterprise and the research project. The choice of framework also gave the researchers a freedom to redesign the workshops after realizing that the first strategy used did not contribute to the process as expected. After re-arranging the agenda the remaining workshops became much more successful, with better interaction and involvement in the dialogue. Reasons for this improvement can partly be found, as Hee Pedersen (2008) argues, in the use of pictures contributing to transform abstract and complex feelings, opinions, experiences, attitudes, et cetera. Especially, the controversial examples of well-known consumer products, for example a drill machine and a rod mixer, provoked reactions. Also, images targeting gendered consumer groups, e.g. female/male razors, inspired the discussion and challenged the normative thinking. Open opposition, towards the workshop and gender issues, turned to interest when humorous observations were used. It was of use to choose images that the participants recognized; pictures, which were also contextualized, for the target group. This way, the steel structure of razors can bridge resistance from those who work in the steel industry. One explanation for the good result can be found in that the attendants focused on the pictures instead of defending their private sphere when discussing gender. The discussions were most of the time kept on a more structural level. It gave the participants an introduction of how gender is done (Gunnarsson and Westberg, 2007).

To document the agreed jointly formed plan in the beginning of the collaboration and to visualize it in a chart, logical model (Annemalm and Bergling, 2007), was a useful strategy for the initial information, although it never was used as a plan for an ongoing evaluation.

A finding was that the combination of different participatory methods, as pictures, anecdotes, and analogies (Gavetti et al. 2005; Ullmark, 2007; Coro and Taylor, 2007) adapted to the context made it possible to counter resistance and to discuss gender from different perspectives and logics. Another finding was the importance of an open attitude, sharing personal thoughts, which made the gender issue less dramatic; and it opened up for discussions with agreeing and disagreeing arguments. It made it possible for the participants to contribute with own examples and reflections from their own lives. This involvement and possibility to formulate the problem are important, as are the personal reflections, for a sustainable learning process. Humor and new patterns of thoughts, sometimes provocative, were useful tools to turn resistance to motivation.

Using the *att-questionnaire* as a starter to gather the employees' opinions about attractive work (Åteg et al., 2004), and creating a curiosity for the result of the questionnaire was a strategic approach to get access to a result driven engineering enterprise. Still, it was not possible, from the results, to make any statements regarding whether or not there were any un-equalities concerning gender issues from the *att-questionnaire*. It might have been better to use a questionnaire with questions addressing gender and organizational issues, for example based on the four "points of entry" by Acker, since organizational behavior were frequently discussed. Before the graphs with the results from the *att-questionnaire* was presented a chart describing the percentage of men and women divided in different ages was shown. This gave the researchers an opportunity to raise questions related to Ackers "points of entry" letting the participants reflect on



whether the organization is gendered or not, gender division of labor/segregation pattern, activities, symbols, and interaction at the workplace.

It was favorable to locate most of the workshops in the parish house, a neutral arena outside the daily workplace and unfamiliar to most of the participants and to the researchers. This reduced possible power struggles between the researchers and the participants, and between the participants (Aagaard, Nielsen and Svensson, 2008). Yet, and regardless of the physical conditions, the most vital factor for a participatory learning process is the established relationship between the participants. Depending on the distance between the practitioners and the researcher from the start, the co-production of knowledge rests on unstable pillars and that can easily tilt if the researcher fails to sense the atmosphere and adapt to the participants context. It is important how the researcher positions her/himself in the interactive process (Tranquist, 2008).

For a company in the size of Dellner Couplers it can be difficult to reach out with information to all staff members. Information is important, and whether or not it was because of information *disappeared*, or lack of interest, or poor communication with the nearest supervisor that information was lost, many of the participants who came to the parish house did not know why they should be there or what the purpose of the workshop was. “They were told to go there” by their boss or colleagues without understanding why. To inform in different ways and to give awareness time to settle is of great value since confusion distracts both the motivation and the process flow. It is therefore of great importance that the middle managers understand the value of high numbers of participants. When discussing the intervention with the HR manager a year after the last workshop, she expressed some regrets for the high pace in launching the process: “If I could rewind the tape I would have liked to give more information from the company”.

When asking whether she was satisfied with the process model the HR manager’s answer was promptly: “Yes, I think it was very good.” Her argument was that she felt so confident since the process model was scientific and developed in collaboration. As an example of advantages she stressed that the idea of integrating gender equality in the discussion about employer brand would not been possible without the inspiration and support from the project:

“I think like this, it is still sensitive to bring up and especially for me as the only woman in the managing team..... for me to take the frontline role and argue for letting more women getting a chance, that is tough, so I really think that we got real benefits from the project, but we have still a long way to go”.

The HR manager was later promoted to Sales & Marketing Director for the company, something she believes was a normative breakthrough thanks to the gender awareness project.

Conclusion

Integrating the two scientific fields of gender and action research must in this case be considered as a key combination for achieved results; the process model worked well for both the enterprise and the project. Three different strategies, approaches, were basically

used - employer brand, the logic model and the concept of Attractive Work in order to get access to the managing board and start fruitful discussions regarding collaboration for increased attractiveness and gender awareness. Using the concept of employer brand was a determining factor for the collaboration, and making arguments for increased gender awareness was perceived as giving rise to possibilities rather than being a burden for the enterprise. This shows the importance of open dialogue when researchers and practitioners strive for participatory knowledge production beneficial for both parties. Furthermore, it also demonstrates that when the company's current needs are addressed, arguments and intervention for more gender equal work places do not necessarily meet resistance. A vital finding is the importance of informing all the stakeholders engaged in the process. Without adequate information, and information that is perceived as logically true for business and individuals, the process might be regarded as a pastime activity rather than as an investment.

Another conclusion is that when launching long-term transforming processes in an organization gender cannot remain a "none issue", it must be integrated because it will examine the organization in a new perspective regarding issues as power, symbols and relations. In the described collaboration gender was integrated and the enterprise became more aware about the importance and possibilities of gender issues as an important component for strengthening the employer brand. The principle of the described process model can be used in similar cases if adapted to the local context.

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End note

¹ Swedish Public Employment Services.

² An annual investigation made by the Swedish Federation of Business Owners and Swed-bank.

- ³ A comparison of women and men's average pay throughout the labor market shows that women earned 84.2 per cent of men's pay in 2008. Thus the pay gap was 15.8 per cent. The gender pay gap for the labor market as a whole has remained fairly constant during the period 1992–2008. Summary Annual Report for 2009 National Mediation Office Sweden.
- ⁴ The importance of the creation of learning from values and representation existing in the society which are transmitted unconsciously.
- ⁵ Number of economically active (daytime) by industry and NUTS2 (EU Standard) SCB Statistic Sweden 2009.
- ⁶ Here, one who practices something, an occupation, profession or technique.
- ⁷ Learning by Fighting was a project within the organization of VINNOVA during the period of 2003–05. The purposes were both to develop gender mainstreaming in the organization and to strengthen the gender competence when launching programs and when evaluate applications.
- ⁸ The innovations system Fiber Optic Valley ran an action oriented gender research project, "Gender network", between 2005 – 08. The purposes have been to both develop the participating organizations and generate new interesting gender research; the target group has been middle managers in 12 organizations/enterprises.
- ⁹ Within the program "Applied Gender Research for Strong Research and Innovation Milieus", financed by VINNOVA, 10 different projects were granted 2008.
- ¹⁰ The four "points entry" defined by Acker, has inspired to many different interpretation with similar meaning.
- ¹¹ Triple Steelix was one of five winners of VINNOVA VINNVÄXT 2004, an initiative taken by Jernkontoret (the Swedish Steel Producers' Association).
- ¹² Bergslagen is a historically, culturally, and linguistically distinct mining district located north of Lake Mälaren in northern Svealand, Sweden. In Bergslagen mining and metallurgic industry have been important since the Middle Ages. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bergslagen>).
- ¹³ Acronym for "Gender perspective for attractive work".
- ¹⁴ VINNOVA, Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems, is Sweden's innovation agency. Our aim is to increase the competitiveness of Swedish researchers and companies.