

**Skriftserie for CAF**

Center For  
Arbejdslivsforskning  
Work Life Research Centre



*Research papers from  
Work Life Research Centre*

*2012, No. 1*

## ***Involvement Without Participation?***

*(Mis-)Managing the Psychosocial Working Environment  
in a Knowledge-Intensive Organisation*

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***ISSN 2245-702X***



## INVOLVEMENT WITHOUT PARTICIPATION?

### (Mis-)Managing the Psychosocial Working Environment in a Knowledge-Intensive Organisation

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#### Abstract

This article presents a case study of a knowledge-intensive company that launched a 2-year project to improve their psychosocial working environment. All parties agreed on the project, and the methods used aimed to promote the involvement of the employees. Surprisingly, the psychosocial working environment did not improve; on the contrary, it deteriorated. The article highlights cultural and structural obstacles to the process, including an inadequate understanding of organisational learning and a narrow focus on market and competition. The endeavours did not consistently increase delegation and participation. In order to develop a more sustainable and viable psychosocial working environment, a broader and more democratic notion of organisational learning and managing is proposed.

**Keywords:** knowledge-intensive organisation; organisational learning; participation; psychosocial working environment; discipline

#### Introduction

Processes of change characterize contemporary working life and represent a growing challenge to organisational learning. A specific side of these changes concerns the *psychosocial working environment* (Agervold, 1998; Warr 1987), which is often neglected or treated as a side-issue in literature on management and organisational development (e.g. Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Specific attention and focused initiatives are unusual. In this respect, this article presents an unusual case. It concerns a knowledge-intensive company dedicated to improving the psychosocial working environment. The case seemed to be a 'best case': the employees were well qualified and all parties were committed to developing meaningful work and satisfying working conditions, involving employees and giving them influence through a steering committee. But, surprisingly, the expectations were not fulfilled. The psychosocial Working Environment deteriorated and the project turned out to be a failure. My research question is: through what kind of social and organisational processes did the changes take place, and how could the results turn out to be the opposite of what was intended and anticipated?

In this article, the processes are studied as – partly failed – *learning processes*. A pivotal notion related to learning is *participation*, i.e. employees (and managers) in cooperation performing work

and actively deciding on, and changing, working conditions. My thesis is that participation is essential for *involvement* and involvement is essential for learning. When it is disrupted or curtailed, e.g. because of high or irrelevant demands, inadequate resources or inadequate influence, involvement is hindered or becomes ambivalent, and learning is hampered. But the concept must be differentiated and used in a careful way. We may assume that full participation requires adequate qualifications and influence on all relevant aspects of a job or a task and that different levels and forms of participation imply different degrees of involvement and learning. E.g. it cannot be reduced to a question of being heard or informed, sometimes misleadingly called ‘influence’. In some jobs, high performance may be achieved by means other than participation, e.g. motivation through incentives such as higher status or salary, or negatively, through sanctions such as demotion or dismissal. Part of my thesis is that such forms of efficiency imply *discipline* and subordination of the employees, thereby negatively affecting their independence, initiative and learning ability. This is not an appropriate condition for improving the psychosocial working conditions.

In the case in question, we saw two kinds of processes of learning. On the one hand, we saw employees’ participation and continuous adaptation to changes in work and organisation, dictated by demands for market share and effectiveness. This kind of demand may be intriguing for some, but may also imply strain, resistance and discipline. On the other hand, we saw the current project focused on the psychosocial working environment, implying protection against strain and risks. These two kinds of learning came into conflict with each other, the former dominating the latter, and the actual processes towards an improved psychosocial working environment were impeded. The analysis seems to show a pattern: authority relations and discipline, embedded in the organisational culture, recurred in the changing processes of the project. Although the participation of the employees (apparently) was desired and intended by all parties, it was actually ‘interrupted’ - and the involvement and learning became partly illusory.

In addition, it is contended that the dominating theories of organisational learning show an insufficient understanding of such processes. They have to broaden their horizon and encompass the real, often conflictual, conditions in contemporary organisations in order to clarify the difficulties and obstacles to participation and organisational learning, especially in relation to improving the psychosocial working environment.

The presentation has the following steps: Firstly, I outline some fundamental views on contemporary workplaces and their development – including knowledge-intensive companies - indicating complex and conflictual conditions for the psychosocial working environment and organisational learning. In relation to some prominent theories on organisational learning, I suggest a more conflictual notion of learning. After that, the case company is presented. I outline the case project and account for its design and the methodology of the research.

After sketching the company's historical background and present situation, the central part of the project is presented: the psychosocial working environment, including leadership and cooperation, before and after the course of the project. On this background, I describe and analyse the characteristics of the change process, aiming at improving the psychosocial working environment, but resulting in its deterioration. I view the process from the angle of disrupted participation and hampered organisational learning and I point out an element of discipline. In the following discussion I apply concepts of authority and corporate culture, emphasising the process as 'situated', i.e. in its concrete relation to the organisation (including the psychosocial working environment and the employees' orientations). In the conclusion, the essential points related to the research question are summed up and the case is related to (aspects of) the general development in working life. Finally, I suggest a visionary perspective, where employees' extended participation and autonomy is integrated into the development of the psychosocial working environment.

### **Trends in contemporary work organisations**

It is well known that most western *management thinking* is optimistic with regard to the development of work - on behalf of management as well as employees. In recent decades, it has especially emphasised the acceleration of changes and their pervasive character in working life. In a comprehensive comparative analysis of management discourses from the 1960s and 1990s, Boltanski and Chiapello showed a trend in these discourses presenting working life as a realm of potentials and opportunities – dismantling constricting bureaucracy and authorities, and superseding these by networks, projects and flexibility, respect for the individual, mobility, equality, meaning, authenticity, autonomy, learning etc. (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). According to this approach, work becomes more and more meaningful and employees become more and more enriched and fulfilled – although at the same time more fluid and borderless. Given the prediction of autonomy, self-fulfilment and responsibility for both employees and managers, focus on the working environment could seem – unnecessary? However, as stated by critical management and labour

process studies, such a rosy picture seems tunnel-visioned and harmonising and without regard for politico-economic institutional arrangements, conflicts, disciplinary power, workload and strains (Alvesson & Willmott (ed), 2003; Thompson & Warhurst (ed), 1998; Deetz, 2003).

The character and prevalence of new organisations is actually contested (Tengblad, 2003; Warhurst & Thompson, 1998; Castells, 1996; Kunda, 1992). A critical view confirms that there is *crisis for the classic, vertical, 'rational' bureaucracy* and for tayloristic organisation of work. But, on the other hand, it maintains that bureaucracy, division of labour, power and conflicts are *not simply eliminated*. Rather, organisations become more manifold and new forms build on (and re-engineer) the old foundations. Companies are embedded in a dynamic global competition and face a more complex and changeable external environment, demanding responsiveness and flexibility, and they develop new strategies for adjustment: strategic alliances, outsourcing and insourcing, splitting up into profit centres etc. – and more multiple and flexible forms of employment (Castells, 1996). Inside the organisation, the boundaries between departments and working functions become more fluid or vague, for instance through project organisation. Responsibility is more often delegated to employees on the operative level, but at the same time, new forms of management control, formal procedures and standardisation are introduced, leaving key decisions with management (Alvesson & Thompson, 2005). Different groups of employees are affected in different ways, e.g. routine workers differ from technical and professional workers. As a general trend we see a deterioration of employees' collective organisations and cultures; the individual standing more alone in its relation to company and management, divided by initiatives regarding salary, contract and management - and governed by corporate culture (Wainwright & Calnan, 2002; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Juul, 2002; Allvin & al., 2006; Volmery, 1993). And we see a general intensification of work. For *knowledge-intensive companies*, there have been major and specific *expectations* regarding high qualifications, autonomy, flexibility, equality in social relations and extensive communication (Alvesson, 2004). But experience shows there is more to this picture. Rules and direct control are often replaced by management by values and output control. Highly qualified professionals and technicians are, so to speak, 'invited' by the corporate culture into an identity of autonomy and identification with the company. But their performance is sometimes (or often) governed and intensified by means of 'double-logic': on the one hand delegated responsibility and influence on the *operative* level – e.g. organised as teamwork - and on the other hand, little or no influence on the *strategic* level and the basic conditions of work (e.g. strategy, allocation of resources, intensity

of work, deadlines etc.). So, the autonomy of the employee becomes ambiguous or even illusory at the same time as the basic power of determination becomes more complex and opaque - and remains with management (Thompson, 2003; Thompson & Warhurst, 1998; Deetz, 1998; Sennett, 1998; Casey, 1995; Moldaschl, 1994). So, conditions for organisational learning in late modern, knowledge-intensive organisations are not only complex, but contradictory and blurred as well.

### **Organisational learning and discipline**

Some of the most prominent theories on organisational learning may be seen as (management's) responses to the development of working life described above. So, the theory of the 'learning organisation' emphasizes systems thinking: all parts and dimensions in the company function together and are interdependent (Senge, 1990). It is essential for management to reflect organisational processes on a system's level and to develop 'shared visions' in order to steer employees in a common direction. Employees and managers must be able to learn in teams, building on 'genuine thinking together' and overcoming routines and defences. Predominant assumptions and generalizations ('mental models') must be constantly challenged, rectified and developed, and every employee must constantly clarify and deepen his or her personal visions and qualifications in a lifelong learning process ('personal mastery'). From another prominent theory, the distinction between 'single loop learning' and 'double loop learning' has become widespread (Argyris & Schön, 1996). In the former, the organisation rectifies and improves its individual practices (techniques, routines, etc.), often gradually and one by one. But in the latter, the basic values and assumptions governing practice ('theory-in-use') are challenged, reflected on and changed. Finally, the theory of 'communities of practice' reflects the need for more focused and systematic knowledge management (Wenger & al., 2002; Wenger, 1998). As knowledge becomes ever more complex, specialized and quickly outdated, learning must be continuous and related to practice (as opposed to 'scholastic learning'). In a community of practice, knowledge is developed through participants' continuous interaction and exchange of knowledge in joint practices, most effectively by autonomous participants. A community of practice is supposed to represent stability in an ever changing context.

A more *conflictual* approach to learning in organisations is represented by the psychodynamic systems theory (Gabriel (ed), 1999). It studies how conflicts, demands and pressure (e.g. for changes) in working life cause insecurity, anxiety and regressive behaviour. Individual elements can be defence mechanisms as denial, splitting and projections ('them-and-us', scapegoating,

idealizations and omnipotence, devaluations, paranoia, dependence etc.) functioning on an unconscious level and often destructive for the organisation, as well as the individual. This may lead to ‘social defences’ functioning on a systems level and inhibiting or blocking learning and development (Menzies-Lyth, 1975; Krantz, 2001). To some degree, this can be prevented or overcome through more open, containing and reflective relations in the organisation.

The above-mentioned theories reflect, each in its own way, different sides of contemporary organisations. They emphasise complexity, frequent and radical changes and demands for high performance, reflection, readjustment and flexible cooperation. However, most of the theories, except for some psychodynamic systems theory, idealise development as a ‘space of potentials and opportunities’ and leave out the fact that organisations are embedded in societal structures that contain oppositions and conflicts. New and more subtle and opaque power relations are underrated and underexposed and the same goes for employees’ competition, workload and strain. Likewise, it can be questioned whether employees’ learning and development are primarily self-fulfilment or, on the contrary, dominated by adaptation, subordination and defence mechanisms – and even resistance (Hodson, 1995). So, there may be good reason to add another dimension to the concept of learning, namely *discipline*.

Inspired by Foucault (1977) – but at variance with him - I define discipline as a strategic practice with two sides: on the one hand, *organising* participants in a certain area (here, working life), making their activities *efficient* and intensive, and on the other hand, *subordinating* participants and concentrating their activities, thereby inflicting (some) *loss* of autonomy and diversity, e.g. with regard to experiences, needs and abilities. The losses may be minor or major, such as the impairment of imagination, learning and the ability to express oneself. Discipline is embedded in structures of power and operates in many different ways – it may be by means of clear subordination, surveillance and sanctions, or it may be in more subtle ways, seemingly in accordance with the participants’ own wishes and initiatives. To some extent, discipline implies that participants *internalise* demands, i.e. exercise some degree of active self-discipline, as opposed to pure coercion and suppression.

Among employees, discipline appears in a variety of ways, e.g. as a strong conformism (Collinson, 2003), as a dependence on leaders (Gabriel & Hirschhorn, 1999) or an ‘over-identification’ with company and career (Casey, 1995; 1999). Or it may appear as a calculating, manipulative

behaviour, with employees exposing some parts and hiding other parts of their behaviour (Collinson, 2003; Casey, 1995), or as ‘cynicism’, where employees, in spite of dis-identification, continue to perform cultural prescriptions (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Paradoxically, even some forms of resistance can sometimes contribute to discipline, e.g. when employees categorically refuse to participate in decisions, thereby increasing their dependence of management (Collinson, 2003; Willis, 1977).

Discipline is an unavoidable side of learning in late modern working life. It can be blocking and destructive with regard to open and democratic learning but, on the other hand, it is not necessarily a fixed and all-embracing characteristic. It is often changeable, movable and interwoven with opposing trends. When employees themselves choose to leave out certain individual needs in favour of common interests in relation to work and the working environment, self-discipline may be transformed, contributing to learning in a liberating sense (more equality, participation, autonomy) (Olsén et al, 2003). However, this did not seem to occur in our case.

### **A ‘best case’?**

Our case was part of a larger project called the BEST study (Better Psychosocial Working Environment), investigating the efforts of 14 companies to improve the psychosocial working environment.<sup>1</sup> The selected case was a large Danish IT company that was implementing a special programme for improving the psychosocial working environment. So, although BEST refers to the larger project as a whole, in *this* article, the BEST project and BEST process refer specifically to the implementation of the programme in the IT company.

The choice of this company is due to its knowledge-intensive character generally (expectations of qualifications, autonomy etc.) and its programme to improve the psychosocial working environment in particular. As the project surprisingly failed, the case becomes especially interesting.

The company had a reputation as a good place to work. It showed some of the characteristics of the so-called post-bureaucratic organisation regarding finances and strategy (increasing customer and market orientation), organisation and work (project groups and employee-driven innovation), but also characteristics from a more ‘traditional’ (i.e. modern) organisation: hierarchy in management, relatively strong collective orientations among employees, along with scepticism of the strong business orientation. Several employees felt that, in recent years, the positive aspects of work had been threatened, and they felt insecure about the future.

In these circumstances, the company decided to implement the BEST-project and drew up three demands for it: 1) It aimed at solving problems through improving working conditions, organisation and management, i.e. individual solutions were not the primary object. 2) The programme was run by a committee with a majority of employees. 3) A number of employee-involving activities were implemented, i.e. the aim was not a purely top-down process or bureaucratic solution. Even under these positive conditions, the project did not succeed. In fact, the situation deteriorated.

Hence, the best of intentions, dialogue and involvement concerning better psychosocial working conditions did not seem to guarantee a general improvement. Through the case study, I shall examine how this can be. At the *specific* level, my question is: through what kind of social and organisational processes did the changes take place? From a learning perspective I seek to highlight interactions between the psychosocial working environment - including the way that work was managed and organised - and the specific processes of change initiated to improve the psychosocial working environment. In particular, I observe how a narrow understanding and practise of management and participation created dependencies, increased discipline and reduced involvement among employees – all contrary to the stated intentions.

### **Design and methodology**

The researchers and the IT-company made a contract of collaboration including the following design (Hasle & al., 2008).

- Establishment of a steering group within the company with the task of facilitating improvements in the psychosocial working environment.
- An initial mapping of the company's psychosocial working environment, carried out by the researchers.
- Working out a plan of action to improve the psychosocial working environment. The company was responsible for this plan.
- Implementation of the above mentioned plan. The researchers played an observational and discussant role (not consultancy).
- A final mapping of the company's psychosocial working environment, carried out by the researchers.

The initial mapping of the company's psychosocial working environment had three components: individual interviews, a 'chronicle workshop' and a survey.

Eleven semi-structured single interviews and two group interviews were carried out, each lasting approximately one hour. The selection of interviewees was made in cooperation between researchers and the HR department. Two representatives from top management and HR respectively, two shop stewards and a safety representative from the steering group, three middle managers and some ordinary employees were interviewed. Together they represented a wide range of functions in the company.

A 'chronicle workshop' was organised (Limborg & Hvenegaard, 2010), structured as a one-day workshop, facilitated by the researchers. Managers and employees participated with the task of describing the development of the psychosocial working environment in the company, identifying strengths and weaknesses in the company's psychosocial working environment.

Finally, the psychosocial working environment was mapped by using the medium length version of the 'Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire' (COPSOQ) (Kristensen, Hannerz, Høgh, Borg, 2005). The COPSOQ is a thoroughly validated questionnaire, most recently published in 2010 (Bjorner & Rugulies (ed.), 2010). The questionnaire contains 95 questions within 26 different dimensions. The questionnaire had been used on a cohort, representative of the Danish labour market, and the *national average* was found for all dimensions. In the IT company, 89% of the employees and managers completed the questionnaire in the initial mapping, equivalent to 636 answers.

The company received two reports based on the initial mapping. The first report was based on the qualitative study and presented strengths and weaknesses in the psychosocial working environment and the ways in which the company dealt with psychosocial work problems. The second report was based on the survey and here the 26 dimensions were presented on a scale with values from 0-100. The scales were constructed in such a way that 50 points represented the national average. The researchers presented the two reports to the company and initiated a discussion as to which problems should be prioritised. Subsequently, the company was committed to making a plan of action for improving the psychosocial working environment. During the design and implementation of the plan, the researchers observed the process rather than participating in it. However, they did affect the process by pointing out a number of points for special attention, and discussing urgent questions in the process. The steering group was contacted regularly and the researchers participated in events associated with the project. The researchers held five meetings with the

steering group and participated in a one-day workshop where the results of the mapping were analysed.

After two years, a *follow-up study* was carried out. Again, the researchers interviewed managers and employees, by and large the same persons interviewed in the first mapping, and they held in-depth discussions with the steering group. Ten semi-structured interviews and a group interview were carried out, each lasting one hour. The questionnaire-based mapping of the psychosocial working environment was repeated, this time with a response rate on 81%, equivalent to 620 answers. The researchers presented two reports to the company with an evaluation of the working environment activities and an evaluation of the quality of the psychosocial working environment.

After receiving the researchers' reports, the company decided to hold a series of further workshops for managers and employees, to write a new plan of action and to repeat the mapping. These activities were not studied by the BEST-project and are not described in a public form.

By making the original contact, the company had already decided to focus on the psychosocial working environment in its next obligatory workplace assessment, so the mapping was seen as their (improved) 'psychosocial work place assessment'. The researchers were aware that their presence might influence the change process somehow, but they defined their role as independent experts and *reflective sparring partners*, not as change agents. They participated in various settings – in meetings with the steering group, when facilitating the chronicle work shop, when presenting the reports from the two mappings for managers and employee representatives and finally during a workshop about the interpretation of the mapping. The company did not ask the researchers for concrete solutions, as it had its own HR department, able to interpret and act on the mapping. The research team considers that the researchers did not influence the change processes significantly.

### **The company and the work – a general description**

The IT Company was founded in 1971 with a staff of four. It soon expanded and became a pioneering company developing a considerable digital infrastructure at the national level, unique for several years, also in a global perspective. For a number of years, there have been between 600 and 900 employees, varying as a result of mergers, divisions, outsourcing and insourcing. Departments and professional groups have cooperated in an inter-disciplinary manner and the technical

developments in IT, together with major ambitions, formed a pioneering spirit. The employees and managers felt a strong attachment to the company and staff turnover was very low.

Market conditions changed gradually and during the 1990s the IT Company had to compete more intensely for orders. Internally, the organisation was changed from a structure based on functions to a structure based on market segments, and the new focus on competition gave a key role to the sales staff at the expense of the technical staff. Flexible delivery times made deadlines tighter.

The increasing market-orientation, starting in the mid 1990s, became ever more predominant and, at the time of the project, it was at the very core of operations. In 2005, a new Managing Director was appointed, representing this new orientation. The perspective became more and more financial and short-sighted: the company should be able to take over other companies or be sold at a higher price – either as a whole or in parts. The Managing Director was associated with one quote: ‘Think about the customer before you fall asleep at night and think about the customer when you open your eyes’. Many employees felt a tension between their professionalism and innovative potentials on the one hand, and increasing demands on business orientation and flexibility on the other.

In 2007 the company had four large, key working areas. The allocation of the employees at these areas is shown in the table below:

Table 1: Allocation of employees in the company

Name	Part of total	Characteristics
Running and maintenance	30%	Are supporting big main-frame IT systems, finding and preventing errors. Highly qualified and specialised work based on work experiences. The dynamic element of the work comes when the unexpected happens.
IT development	25%	Creates new IT solutions in temporary project groups. One person can often be affiliated to several project groups. All are highly qualified, and many have very specialised knowledge.
Service	20%	Servicing customers when they experience problems using the company's products. Most of this work takes place in call centres, and a large part of it is routine. Work takes place around the clock
Administration	15%	Finance, accounting, personnel, and secretariat. A quite inhomogeneous group

Over half (55%) of the employees participated (always or sometimes) in changing projects. They all worked in (crowded) open-space offices, with managers in the same room. Approximately 30% of the employees had a company-paid workstation at home and many worked from home once or several times a week.

### **The chronicle workshop**

As mentioned above, a chronicle workshop was one of the first steps taken in the mapping of the psychosocial working environment. Six employees and three managers worked together for one day with three researchers from the BEST-project. The aim was to reconstruct and interpret the history of the company, especially with a view to developing the psychosocial working environment. The workshop gave a relatively coherent narrative of the company's development, culture and work environment. It confirmed a general view among the staff that the current development was necessary and inevitable. However, at the same time it illustrated that this interpretation was not without flaws and contradictions.

Two problems associated with the recent developments in the company were emphasised:

*Insecurity* among the staff and a feeling that work had become *intensified* and more demanding.

During the workshop, the participants talked about the early pioneering spirit, successes and work satisfaction, but also about turbulent periods under great pressure, about employees who had been fired, and about other employees 'breaking down'. The closer we came to the present time, the higher the speed, and the greater the uncertainty about the direction. So, there were indications of criticism, but they were not elaborated. Instead, a consensus was formed about progress and an inevitable development. By the end of the workshop, three groups of participants each completed a concluding overview on the company's development:

The first group presented four phases:

'Prior to 1994: Nursery school/kindergarten, security, parents drop you off and pick you up again, dummy in the mouth.

1995-97: School, you have to look after yourself, processes of change.

1997-2000: High school, teenage years, transition to adulthood, many changes.

2000- : 'Real life', many changes, unknown where we will be tomorrow.'

The second group presented three phases with the following key words:

'1986-98: Big is beautiful.

1998-2002: Introverted, internal changes, self-indulgence.

2002- : Knife at the throat, having to manage the competition.'

The third group presented four phases with the following key words:

'1992-98: My God, we are earning money!

1999-2001: Smile, no time to rest! Get out of your offices.

2001-2003: Where are you off to?

2003- : Full speed ahead, but some of us don't know where to.'

All three groups pointed to insecurity and intensification as predominant features in the present and the future. Many things are happening, but there is uncertainty about the direction of the company. At the same time, the groups were of the opinion that this was something one had to accept if one were grown-up and serious. The summaries of the company history had a self-critical and ironic tone. One group used the metaphor of childhood and youth, the others used metaphors about being introverted and self-pitying, and all three groups described the early years as naive, and recent years

as more mature, when the company confronts ‘real life’, a knife is held to its throat, and the company becomes more realistic and speeds up. This happens as the company ‘comes of age’, which at the same time leads to insecurity and disorientation, which again might cause greater compliance. In addition, several participants argued that the security that people say they remember from earlier years might be illusory: there was also insecurity in those days, and heavy workloads, but people today are fussier and more prone to complain. In this way, the problems and stress that people pointed to were partly denied (‘actually, things have not become any worse’) and at the same time viewed as inevitable (‘that’s just reality’). If you want to be taken seriously, you cannot raise such problems.

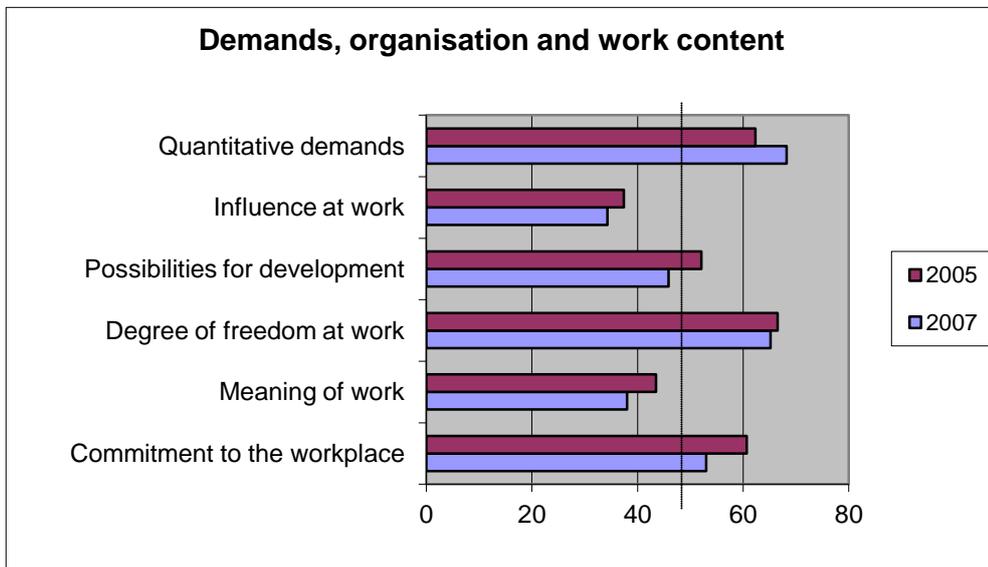
There is a view that people ought to appreciate the possibilities and challenges, which the new reality has also brought. Instead of looking for problems, you have to find your strengths: ‘We can be the best’. Thus, none of the participants placed responsibility for the stress on anyone in particular, and no one presented any alternatives. The narrative was consensual, preparing the employees for a pressure that they cannot really oppose.

I consider the specific mix of workshop participants to have had an effect on the dominant narrative. Generally speaking, it was the managers who expressed the affirmative aspects of the story and perhaps, in this way, dampened the general willingness to be critical. There was not an apparent or authoritarian dominance; the communication was informal and open. It was more a question of a subtle authority, which might not have been conscious or intended. Criticism was not outlawed, but limited. It was not silenced, but rendered harmless. Problems were described as exceptions, deviations or mistakes. What was left at the end was the perception of a ‘burning platform’ (Kotter, 1996) which seemed to become the predominant understanding: One must look forward to the future, be realistic and do what is necessary. Imagining and reflecting on alternative directions is not an option. A scenario like this makes it difficult to discuss what is necessary and what it is possible to do with regard to the psychosocial working environment. It may have a disciplinary effect on the employees.

### **The psychosocial working environment**

The survey-based mapping of the psychosocial working environment presented a more negative picture than the interviews and the chronicle workshop did. The tables below illustrate the results of 11 of the 26 dimensions in 2005 and 2007. The national average is marked by a vertical dotted line.

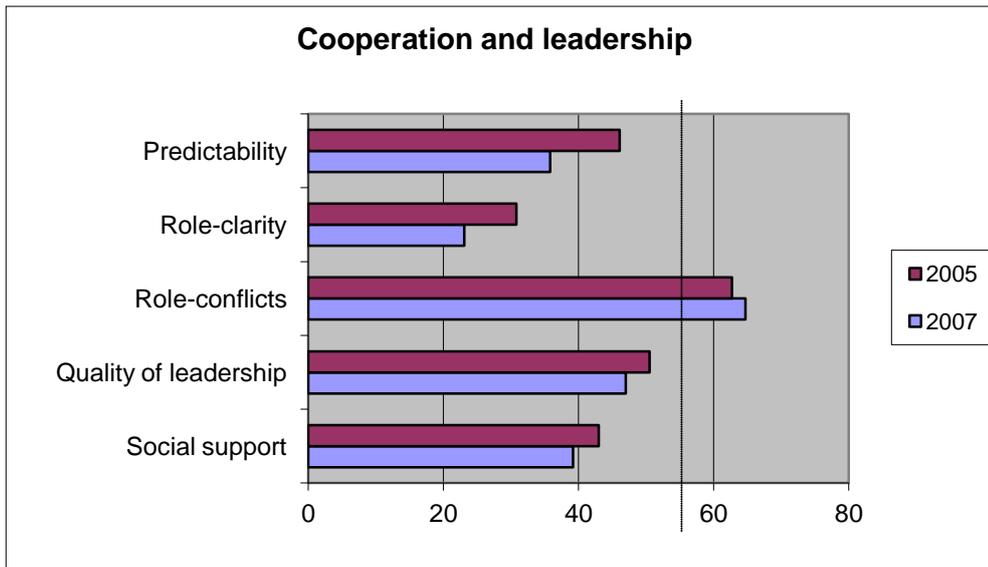
Table 2



As the table illustrates, the quantitative demands at work are considerably higher than the national average in 2005, increasing substantially between 2005 and 2007. Influence is significantly below the national average in 2005, surprising for a knowledge intensive company, and it falls further during the project period. Possibilities for development are average in 2005, a low level for a knowledge intensive company, and fall below average in 2007. The degree of freedom at work is high and remains high throughout the project period. The meaning of work is low in 2005, and falls markedly. Commitment (which includes emotional involvement) is high in 2005, but falls significantly during the project period.

Finally, it should be added that *cognitive stress* – not included in the table above – is average in 2005 but increases during the project to a level significantly above average (cognitive stress defined by: impairment of concentration, decision making, memory, thinking).

Table 3



All dimensions relating to cooperation and leadership deteriorate during the project and end at a level below the national average. Role-clarity is low in 2005, falling considerably during the project period. Role-conflicts are above and predictability is slightly below the national average in 2005 and both deteriorate further. The evaluation of the quality of leadership is slightly below the national average in 2005, but during the project period it falls further.<sup>ii</sup>

Since 1986, the company had pursued a strategy of management by values and self-governance for the employees. The employees reported extensive freedom in the immediate daily work (operative level). They were not closely monitored, they could move freely, take a break, talk to their colleagues, etc. When working on projects, the employees also had an extensive influence on the way they solved their tasks. This created a foundation for social relations and a considerable employee involvement, pride and meaning.

*‘What gives meaning in the job? When you are allowed to carry out your work and get something to function, and help some other groups to make it function. That gives meaning... The awareness of the many people who are dependent on what we are doing becomes apparent when something goes wrong. The many people who depend on our work turn out to be a strain – imagine if it does not work!’ (Female programmer).*

This significance was not just a result of the current situation; it was based on the last 30 years in the company, its traditions and corporate culture. This is the *one side of the story*.

*The other side* is that the level of freedom did not entail greater influence on the work content and conditions, including the amount of work. Quantitatively, the demands were exceptionally high, and had increased further during the project period. At the same time, the employees felt that demands were unclear and unlimited (unclear roles). This was combined with frequent changes in the company over a considerable period. The corporate culture had emphasised autonomy for the employees, but they had not been granted the necessary *influence at work*.

*'In our department, we are hidden by 'task-separation' (no single programmer may have knowledge of the whole system). This means that we are no longer allowed to carry out our work! A great deal of authority is removed from our jobs. It makes us feel that they do not trust us anymore. But when something goes wrong, they come with their hat in their hand and are dependent on us' (Female programmer).*

In practice, it was primarily the individuals' freedom on an *operative* level and their *sense of responsibility* and *identification* with the company that had been supported. The combination of greater pressure and increased responsibility, without any influence at work, may have created an increased risk of stress and less commitment. Despite the freedom in the immediate day to day work, the level of *real autonomy* for the employees had not increased. The problem had increased during the project period.

*'When people are running faster, they also feel they have less influence. The opportunities for development are reduced' (Convener of the company).*

During the project, the employees had experienced increasing demands combined with decreasing influence, clarity of roles, predictability and social support. The employees now felt a greater level of cognitive stress combined with less satisfaction, meaning and commitment to the workplace. Overall, the level of involvement in the workplace had decreased. This means that an important element of the company's strength, socially and productively, was eroded.

### **The BEST project – a failure?**

We are witnessing a paradoxical development: a renowned company with dedicated employees gets involved and invests substantial resources in a project aimed at improving the psychosocial working environment, but the result is a deterioration of the working environment!

Let us look at the project organisation: A central steering group was set up, the so-called BEST group, consisting of management and employee representatives. After the initial mapping of the psychosocial working environment, the first task of this group was to interpret the results. However, the group could not manage this task due to the highly varied working conditions in the company. Therefore, the group decided to involve the employees in the interpretation of the questionnaire results. This was done within eight different inter-departmental functional areas. The steering group organised seven workshops, each comprising representatives from one functional area (although two functions were combined in one of the workshops). All workshops lasted one day and had about 20 participants, both managers and employees.

Each group discussed and interpreted the questionnaire results in relation to its own specific situation. For instance, the group *IT maintenance* discussed the high level of specialisation and the associated job insecurity and general insecurity. In this group, the issue of further education and training was important. In the group *IT development*, people often had tasks that they did not have the adequate competencies to solve, and they had to shift between different project groups with varying styles of management. The ongoing development of competencies, distribution of projects and group dynamics were important issues. In the *Logistics* group, the discussion focused on the high demands for accuracy and the problems associated with the large number of colleagues who did not meet deadlines. Pivotal questions were ‘good behaviour’, feedback and procedures. In the *Administration* group, the discussion focussed on frustrations concerning the lack of understanding among their colleagues for the need to meet deadlines, comply with certain standards, follow procedures, etc. All the groups freely discussed the issues they found important and pressing; they highlighted strengths and weaknesses and tried to identify possible changes. The results were reported to the steering group.

The employees felt that these workshops were meaningful and a learning experience. But the groups were not asked to prioritise or take concrete action. Moreover, the members of each group worked in different departments, and therefore could not *together* integrate their results into their normal working day. The groups reported the discussions and results to the steering group and

expected this group to deal with them. In this way, the participants passed on their experiences, but at the same time, they *handed over* the responsibility and the initiative. This could be interpreted as a *dependency relationship* in practise. As a result of this process, the steering group had an overwhelming amount of data and had serious difficulties drawing clear conclusions and taking action.

The data included a heavy workload, low influence, lack of role-clarity and low predictability. On this basis, the steering group recommended the top management to initiate a *development programme for managers* with the positive title: 'Clarity, visibility and dialogue'. With this decision, two central problems were not addressed: the workload and the low level of influence, i.e. perhaps the two issues giving rise to the most conflicts. This selection may be seen as significant for the company and the project. This is a topic to which we shall return.

The management training programme took place during the autumn of 2006 and the spring of 2007, and the participating managers evaluated it positively. They learnt about situational leadership and their own strengths and weaknesses and, at the same time, they became aware of the need to take individual considerations into account.

*'It has been a very good programme. Situational management was very good. We have talked to the employees about it' (Participant, manager in Customer Service).*

*'We have done a lot with regard to the managers. It is a good outcome of the mapping results, and strategically it is a good thing' (Managing Director).*

From the point of view of the employees, however, it did not bring about any marked changes in the working environment.

*'We felt that our manager was on a training camp, but... ' (Employee).*

*'The purpose of the management training project was that there should be greater clarity concerning roles. Whether it has had any effect on role clarity is not quite clear' (Union representative).*

*'The psychological problems are particularly closely related to high levels of pressure, insecurity and poor management. There has now been a management training programme, but they don't act on the fact that there are managers who are useless' (Union representative).*

From a critical point of view, the management training course may be seen as a further example of handing over problems and initiative. Instead of identifying concrete initiatives relating to the work, the steering group passed the problem and the solution on to a different setting: the managers and their skills – and experts were hired to solve the problem through a training programme. At the overall level, we could call this a ‘dual move’. After the first mapping, conducted by the researchers, the company involved the employees and collected their experiences and views about the work and the company – this implies a move ‘from below’. The collected data was then passed on to the steering group, who translated (and reduced) the results into a management issue, expecting a management training course and new experts to be the solution. This was a move ‘from above’, and this pacified the employees’ involvement and ignored their experiences. At best, the managers gained some useful knowledge, but it can hardly be termed organisational learning. We term this overall approach as a kind of ‘*involvement – without participation*’! With this approach, it may be possible to utilise fragments of the employees’ experiences. But the very process of experience is cut off and participation in the improvement of work and working conditions is not facilitated.

### **Learning in the organisation?**

There was a potential for developing better working conditions, but during the project period we witnessed a deterioration of the psychosocial working environment. So, the project failed to achieve its objectives. The most obvious explanation is that the project was only a small element in the overall dynamics of the company. The project ‘drowned’ in the intensified daily processes, not least due to the continuous changes, expansion, outsourcing and restructuring.

*‘I don’t think things have improved. There may have been some initiatives to improve matters, but every day is so busy (...). The company has had a change of paradigm. When a process concerning the psychosocial working environment is taking place, I think it disappears in our result-oriented way of thinking’ (Employee, sales).*

So, the company seemed to be absorbed in an intensified market-orientation, neglecting the psychosocial working environment of the employees. The process of experience in the project was cut off and the involvement of the employees was pacified. This was not solely a question of bad will on the part of management, although some of the management actually preferred traditional structures of authority. The non-participation of employees was also about the fundamental way of

comprehending leadership and management, to a certain degree shared by management and employees – in complementary positions of dominance and dependence. Management did not force through their own solutions, subordinating employees in an obvious authoritarian way. At least a part of it was benevolent and forthcoming, talking informally with employees. Decisions in the steering group were apparently taken jointly, and representatives of the employees did not protest or voice alternative ideas. However, at the same time, there were indications that critique was curtailed and rendered harmless. There was not a culture of openness, acceptance of basic disagreements or ‘social imagination’ (Olsén & al, 2003). We saw an exception to this in the chronicle workshop, but the opening was closed again through a narrative about the new and demanding conditions that cannot be questioned, i.e. a ‘burning platform’. To ‘be realistic and look forward’ here meant to disregard past experience. Overall, we observed a decline in employees’ collectivity, and further conditions for *discipline*, i.e. adjustment to higher demands in combination with less autonomy. How did the parties perceive this?

*Top management* saw the overall development as positive. There was no cause for real concern: the company’s reputation was intact and the employees were still like one big family. This was the general attitude, although some managers were aware that the psychosocial working environment had been neglected and that it was necessary to remedy some of the consequences of the developments, especially in order to retain key employees. The managers did not question central elements in the market and business orientation, including the frequent restructurings, the pressure and the lack of influence; these issues were perceived as unavoidable, not debatable. Hence, what we are witnessing among management may be a deterioration of ‘double loop learning’ (Argyris & Schön, 1996) or ‘systems thinking’ (Senge, 1990).

*The employees* were more critical or sceptical, but mostly remained passive, waiting to see what would happen. They seemed to accept the management interpretation of development as being necessary, unavoidable, and they did not voice and discuss their criticism openly in public. They were still committed to the company and the work, but their commitment and satisfaction were decreasing. The union representatives bemoaned the employees’ passive attitude and lack of understanding of the situation and its gravity. Neither did the employees express the key issue about the significance of the psychosocial working environment for participation, cooperation, initiative and reliability – aspects that all affect company productivity and development. Hence, we see no improved ‘community of practice’ (Wenger & al., 2002; Wenger, 1998), or any democratic learning

from below (Olsén & al., 1993; 2003). On the contrary, the previous strengths concerning learning and innovative capacity deteriorated.

During the BEST project, the problems of the psychosocial working environment were handled and gradually transformed – through a process of organising, interpretation and selection – and limited to a question of leadership or management, and the question of *managing and organising* was reduced to a question of *managers*. Accordingly, the IT company could externalise the problem, sign a contract with experts concerning managers' education. The solution seemed obvious and convenient - displaced into a different professional sphere. But there were neither significant improvements in the quality of management, nor in the psychosocial working environment. Solutions acquired – to a certain degree - a symbolic character, while crucial problems were left unsolved.

The employees' lack of influence was reinforced during the project, resulting in a reduced level of involvement and perhaps more dependency and defensiveness (Krantz, 2001; Gabriel & Hirschhorn, 1999; Menzies-Lyth, 1975).

## **Discussion**

Our case was a knowledge-intensive company with highly qualified employees who had historically developed professional ambitions, involvement in work and attachment to the company. In recent decades, the company had been exposed to increased competition and had undergone a large number of changes. The internal structure based on functions had been changed to a structure based on market segments, increased focus on competition and short-term profit – and higher status for the sales staff at the expense of the technical staff. This development had caused scepticism and uncertainty among the employees.

At the beginning of the BEST project we found high quantitative demands, relatively low predictability, low role-clarity and many role-conflicts. But unexpectedly, we also found that possibilities for development were only at the level of the national average and influence at work and meaning of work were at below average levels. Along with high commitment and high degrees of freedom at work (on operative level), this leads to high risks of strain. Hence, employees' *participation was under pressure*: on the one hand there was a possibility that the external pressure was internalised, resulting in conformity through identification with the work, while on the other

hand, low meaning, development and influence could counteract this and create ambivalence, resistance or cynicism in the individual (Collinson, 2003; Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

Although the employees still insisted on professional pride and involvement, they expressed disappointment and pointed out flaws in their involvement and attachment, and decreasing collectivity. In their daily work, however, dissatisfaction was mainly expressed as informal complaining and nagging – not articulated in a public debate or in organised policies.

The situation described above was *the point of departure for the BEST project*, aimed at an improved psychosocial working environment. In itself, the project was an opportunity to achieve a better working environment, including the involvement of employees and managers. But the project must be seen in its wider context. The daily work in the organisation was pervaded by many other projects with higher priority and tough conditions. Originating in the external market and imparted via the internal hierarchy, there was a demand for initiative and pressure from tasks and problems, appearing as an imperative. The offer of change was presented in this context as an extra expectation and task.

The researchers' first survey primarily showed general problems (and strengths) and did not point to any concrete solutions or initiatives. By means of the workshops, however, more concrete interpretations of problems emerged among the employees. But these understandings did not evolve *in relation to* the concrete context of work in everyday practise, and conditions were not provided for the employees' emergent solutions. The fact that the experiences from the workshops were not related to or implemented in the concrete situations of work, but handed over to the steering group, may be an indication that managers and employees alike stayed within a horizon of dichotomy between management and work. This also applies to the steering group, where representatives from both parties ended up confirming a solution (managers' training) that displaced or denied the real problem. The result was a deterioration of the psychosocial working environment.

So, the split we saw in the psychosocial working environment between a level of (no) influence on the basic conditions of work – and a level of performance or operation ('degrees of freedom at work') recurred in the very process of change. I called it a 'move from below' followed by a 'move from above', i.e. 'involvement without participation'.

Hence, we see a connection between, on the one hand, the character of organisation and psychosocial working environment and, on the other hand, managers' and employees' (inadequate) ability to develop the organisation, to improve and maintain the psychosocial working environment - i.e. an ability to learn in the organisation. The participation of the employees was under pressure of high intensity and low influence, i.e. lack of autonomy, and their *involvement* became ambiguous and exposed. Without explicit critique or resistance, I will call this adaptation discipline. This pattern was reproduced in the processes of development and learning, intended to improve the psychosocial working environment: the participation of the employees was interrupted and replaced by insufficient management initiative. The pattern may be interpreted as a corporate culture, its basic assumptions saying that leaders and managers take care of general and overall issues like vision, strategy, resources and culture, while the common employees perform the work. The basic dichotomy in question reproduced *relations of authority* (although not in obvious ways), adjustment to higher demands, and at the same time more dissatisfaction, impaired involvement and learning.

This line of reasoning is beyond the predominant theories of learning organisations and communities of practice. In these theories, knowledge-intensive companies are rather seen as post-modern in the sense of complex, flexible, dynamic and learning - and development as a space of potentials and opportunities. It is disregarded that these companies carry on oppositions as well as other long-established organisational elements – interwoven with new elements of empowerment, subordination, competition, strain and discipline of employees. A more adequate understanding of employees' participation, involvement and learning would encompass a more critical focus on conflict, strain and discipline and an analysing focus on opportunities for developing autonomy. This implies a shift in (the view on) the normal balance of power, which is controversial but a condition for opening new and visionary perspectives: opportunities to make (radical) experiences linking the employees' productive and meaningful side of work to their continuous learning and protecting themselves against strain and mental illness.

## **Conclusion**

My research question was: through what kind of social and organisational processes did the changes take place, and how could the result turn out to be the opposite of what was intended and anticipated? What happened in the project in terms of organisational learning?

I have tried to show that the process and its negative outcome must be seen partly in the light of the organisational conditions at the start of the project, including authority relations, corporate culture, the psychosocial working environment and subjective orientations of the employees – and partly as a result of the project's specific organisation. Furthermore, I argue for a connection between the two: the conditions at the start of the project were to a large extent reproduced in the very organisation and course of the project. The collective learning processes 'collided' with a dichotomy way of thinking, saying that leaders and managers deal with overriding issues like strategy, resources and culture, whereas employees perform work on operational level. I.e. a disciplinary horizon, impairing involvement among employees and impeding new organisational learning.

The presented case may be surprising compared to widely held views on knowledge-intensive organisations – especially with regard to workload and authority relations, autonomy and meaning of work (see Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson & Thompson, 2005; Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). But it is less surprising compared to the critical research, presented earlier (second paragraph). In these studies it is pointed out that although knowledge-intensive companies are far from Taylorism's classic separation of conception and execution of work with its extreme specialization and significant authority relations, *it does not mean* that power relations have disappeared. But strain, authority, dichotomy and discipline have got new characteristics and exist in new constellations. Work has got higher degrees of freedom, more variation and informal social relations on operational level, but still contains subordinating and bureaucratic elements – now governed more by culture and values, subjective incentives and indirect control and sanctions. It makes autonomy ambiguous, or even illusory. Hence we see general contradictory conditions for organisational learning.

Seen in this light, the analysis contributes to a clarification of the general development. We can be more aware of conflicts, difficulties and opportunities in the development and organisational learning in this type of companies. However, this implies that the prominent theories of organisational learning, introduced at the beginning of the article, must incorporate a more conflictual dimension into the understanding of the companies' complexity, dynamics, flexibility – and challenges to learning.

Firstly, I propose that the notion of discipline is specified and given a pivotal place in theory. This will enable us to conceive contradictions in participation and learning on the subjective level:

between, on the one hand efficiency, affirmation, involvement and identification and, on the other hand, subordination, disappointment, dis-identification, cynicism, defence mechanisms etc.

Secondly, I propose that improvement of the psychosocial environment is conceived in a more visionary and democratic perspective: projects might aim at employees' participation and enhanced autonomy on both the operative and strategic levels, including influence on management and leadership. This would probably make employees' involvement and organisational learning more stable.

The challenge could be to develop this potential. Empowered employeeship or co-workership (Tengblad, 2003; 2003a) could be the real prerequisite for broadening the notion of the psychosocial working environment, emphasizing development, meaning and responsibility of work and, *at the same time*, protecting employees against overload and strain. Obviously, this would disturb the 'balance' of power in the organisation and may cause troubles and problems: Disturbing the balance of power normally generates resistance and conflicts, and this also applies to processes with a democratic perspective. Participants must be willing and able to contain, handle and learn from such conflicts. On the other hand, it might put the issue into another – broader and more meaningful – perspective in the long run. I do not say that this is a prerequisite for all improvements of the psychosocial working environment – far from it. What I propose is, that we may need – in addition to the many pragmatic steps and necessary measures for a better working environment - a more visionary, long-term and sustainable perspective.

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<sup>i</sup> The 14 companies represented three sectors: industry, public care and knowledge intensive work. Positive and negative experiences were studied, beginning in 2005 and finishing at the end of 2007. i.e. before the financial crisis (Sørensen & al. (eds.) 2008).

The BESTstudy was financed by the Danish Working Environment Research Fund. Researchers from the Technical University of Denmark, Roskilde University, the National Research Center for the Working Environment and 'TeamArbejdsliv' ['Team Working Life'] participated in the project.

<sup>ii</sup> It should be noted that the above are overall results for the whole company. There are eight cross-departmental areas: 'administration', 'business development', 'IT/maintenance', 'IT/development', 'customer service/support, logistics', 'reception/maintenance/canteen' and 'sales and marketing'. The results for these different areas show a certain variation in some of the dimensions, but only to a small extent. However, the second questionnaire shows two contradictory results: the area 'reception/maintenance/canteen' scores below the national average on *degree of freedom at work* whereas the company as a whole scores markedly above the national average. The other contradiction is in *cognitive stress* where the area 'logistics' has a markedly better score than the national average, whereas the company as a whole has a decidedly negative score.