Distance work: in the intersection between technology, politics and organization

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Abstract

This article describes three cases of ICT-supported development in public-sector organisations representing different types of distance work, and covering a time span of around 15 years. The first case describes telemedicine in a hospital; the second is about the introduction of home-offices in the Norwegian Labour Inspectorate. The last case describes a system with distributed work in the Norwegian Public Road Administration

Differences and similarities between the three cases are discussed, and we argue that the last case is qualitatively different from the others as distance work here emerged more as a necessary consequence of a comprehensive reorganisation, while distance work was of a more limited character in the first two cases. The cases also differ according to where the initiative came from; bottom-up initiatives were important in the first two cases, while the reorganisation in the Road Authorities was initiated from the top. The article further argues that the conditions for distance work have changed due to shifts in political paradigms, and that working from a distance has become "business as usual" in a number of organizations.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to sketch some aspects of how distance work or telework are inscribed in a more general context, focusing especially on the importance of technology, politics and the organisation where telework is taking place. We will use three cases from the public sector to discuss how the empirical reality of distance work has changed. The first is from Sunnaas, a hospital specialized in rehabilitation of people with severe physical injuries, the second is from Norwegian Labour Inspectorate and the Norwegian Public Roads Administration is the third. The cases cover a span of more than 15 years, starting at the very beginning of the 90ies.

The article is built up as follows: First we present the development of distance work in the three organizations, and then we give some reflections. Our intention is more to circle in some questions, than to provide definite answers. The main basis for the article is Knudsen's practical experience as a leader and a participant in distance-work projects and reorganizations, and Bjørnholt and Heen's research, covering two of the cases.

2. Case studies

Sunnaas hospital

Sunnaas is a, in Norway, renowned hospital, specialized in rehabilitation of people with large traumas. It is the only of its sort in the country, and has a highly specialized competence which to a limited degree exists elsewhere in the country. The hospital is well staffed. Around 1990, the hospital was owned by the City of Oslo, but was financed by state means, mainly in the form of payment for treatment from counties all over the country. Since then the hospital has been transformed into a state-owned hospital.

At the time, expectations for developing and using ICT in a number of areas were high. As the hospital's staff was very well qualified, to make use of this competence elsewhere, through dispersion or communication, was an ever-present question, and ICT was seen as a way of making this possible. There was also a lot of engagement for improving the living conditions for disabled people, and it was quite easy to get money for promising projects.

As spin offs from a more general development project at the hospital, a number of projects which specifically addressed ICT supported communication over a distance were developed.

- Telemedicine where distance communication about patients was established between attending personnel at Sunnaas, and personnel in other hospitals. It was made possible for the personnel at Sunnaas to diagnose patients from a distance and help with their rehabilitation programmes, and "living pictures" of patients were transferred by phone. (One must remember that these days the Internet was just in the beginning and communication went by several ordinary telephone lines).

- Supporting first line personnel in their work with actual patients as well as following up on courses which were regularly held at Sunnaas.
- Projects focusing on development and research, using ICT in the process
- Projects aimed at making disabled persons more self-sufficient and enabling them to work, either from home or through adaptations in the work place.

The cornerstone of these projects was long-term financial support by "Centre for a Better Worklife", the Ministry's "Action Plan for Disabled People", the then state-owned telephone company and the Oslo City Board and the involvement of two experienced action researchers.

All the projects were focused on coupling different organizations through the use of ICT. They were oriented towards employing new technology to make possible a geographically dispersed use of the staff's competence. Even if the projects had organizational consequences, the focus was on improving medical treatment through employing new technology, not on organizational change.

Important conditions for the projects were:
- A supportive political environment, especially regarding improving conditions for disabled people
- Adequate financial support
- Support from research milieus outside the hospital
- New and exciting technology and a general interest in its development and use
- Supportive and creative local environment, competent and engaged local enthusiasts

Difficulties were:
- Resistance because new forms of working challenged traditional borders between professions
- The technological infrastructure was inadequately developed, which entailed both economic problems (it was very expensive to transfer pictures) and few hospitals and doctors' offices had adequate technology to make optimal use of the technology
- Projects were perceived to fail, often because of too large expectations, entailing difficulties with further financing and loss of enthusiasm. There was a tendency to see problems as technical and in need of technical solutions while they as much met political or organizational hindrances (for instance the borders between the professions).

As a spin off from the projects, the hospital developed a permanent centre for specific, small groups with permanent disabilities with widespread use of ICT, especially for networking amongst patients and attending personnel. The hospital school also improved its standing as a national centre of competence regarding ICT support for disabled people.

During the period described, the hospital was radically reorganized according to New Public Management principles. A governing board with a wide mandate was installed. The members were nominated politically. With the exception of employees' representatives, the board members were from private businesses. The chairwoman was a

leading conservative politician and prominent neo-liberalist ideologue. The board defined research and development as a state responsibility and not the task of the hospital, if not externally financed. This entailed considerable restrictions on the further development of distance work.

The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority
The Labour Inspection is a national authority, with three organisational levels. Local offices are found a number of places, but due to organizational reform around 1995 a number of small and semi-small 1.line offices were closed. The enterprises which were to be visited, where still at the same places, however, and a number of people didn't want to move, or to commute over long distances. Home offices were seen as a possible solution to both problems and a project to develop home-offices and mobile offices for the inspectors was taken, partly on the union's initiative. The Labour Inspection was included in a study of the use of home offices in state agencies, carried out by (Bjørnholt, 2002 a) on behalf of the Ministry of Work and Administration (AAD).

The home offices were especially used in the following circumstances:
- As substitute for (closed) local offices which meant that geographical efficiency, as well as employment in the periphery, could be maintained
- Making it possible for the employee to work from home in cases of illness
- A one person project with a mobile office. This created a new division of labour between the inspector and the mercantile personnel who took on more of the executive work.

The start and main core of the projects were 18-20 older inspectors and mercantile staff whose offices were closed down and who were in the process of quitting or commuting over long distances. Later, also pregnant women saw home offices as beneficial: They could stay at work longer before giving birth, as well as maintain contact with the office by combining parental leave with working part- time from home. Thus it became easier to avoid set back of careers that may be a result of extended full-time leave. Some, however, thought that the women got "undeserved benefits" because they didn't see it as part of the project, and this created some tensions.

The person with the mobile office was met with much scepticism, both because of legal questions and ICT-safety. The new division of work and the quality of work was also questioned. His efficiency became much higher than before and this also caused resistance. In the end, the inspector quit.

Important conditions for the project:
- The home offices had broad support in the organization.
- As a project, exceptions from usual customs and some formal rules were allowed
- Immediate usefulness for involved actors
- The home offices were part of a more extended work-environment work.
- The project was supported by external partners (The Ministry of Work and Administration – AAD and the Work Research Institute).
Difficulties were:

- Issues concerning security and legality took much attention, and were in some cases difficult to solve.
- Much weight was put upon obtaining advanced technology which actually was not needed. In combination with difficulties with deliveries, this created much unnecessary work.
- Organizational turbulence due to organisational change and use of home offices.
- Increased work loads for clerical staff.
- Tensions arising from allowing (female) clerical staff to perform the functions of (male, engineer) inspectors.

A more comprehensive project aimed at using ICT to create a new methodology for the inspection process was planned. This project included a number of partners, but was never launched, partly because the local participants had obtained their primary goal and no longer had the same motivation. Politically there became less room for long-sighted development, and the introduction of obligatory internal control in the industries changed the inspectors' roles altogether.

An important experience was that, except for the case of the mobile office, the most useful technology was cheap and mostly in place. This fact was realized by and by.

In contrast to the hospital case, this project was mainly focused on distant work within the organization. It can be seen as a quite direct answer to changed circumstances, but its scope was limited and home offices were mainly seen as an adaptation to consequences of organizational change.

The Norwegian Public Roads Administration
The agency was subject to a large reorganization 2002-2006. The production part of the agency, representing half the staff, was split off and organized as a state owned company. The remaining part was regionalized, flattened and slimmed. New, region-wide organizational units, with regional head-quarters and regional leaders, were created. Due to a revitalization of Norwegian regional policy in the same period, the five new headquarters in the regionalized organization were located in medium sized to small towns, and at a distance from the bulk of employees and expertise. Leaders in general got more subordinates, due to abolishing one level of leaders. In the political guidelines it was said that distance work and new forms of working and of organizing work should be used as means for an improved and more efficient organization.

The reorganization entailed that units and persons were relocated, organizationally as well as geographically. Especially manning the headquarters was an important goal and a great challenge as many people didn't want to move. Distance work or commuting was used as individual solutions during a transitional period that ended in 2006, upon which they were expected to move. This type of distance work was seen as necessary only for a transitional period.

However, the reorganization also entailed a dispersed structure in which distance work-relations are a permanent feature. In every region there were special sections, "resource

units" which should serve all the local offices. Organizationally the employees in the section are tied to the regional headquarter, but their actual location is mostly at local offices. Leaders in these units typically have subordinates in three or more places, and employees will have to work with colleges in different places. This type of distance work is thought of as being part of the regular organization.

We have done three studies of distance work in the Public Roads Administration. The first was done prior to reorganization in 2002 by Margunn Bjørnholt, and she reported mainly positive experiences with distance work prior to the reorganization. The basic findings were summarized as follows:

A variety of different distant work relations and models were found. The structure of the distant work relationships was found to be important for its well-functioning as well as for distant workers' wellbeing. While single distant workers located alone within a "foreign" work community had the most demanding situation, distance work could represent a win-win situation for intact work communities where only the leader was distant. The employees experienced more independence and efficiency, and the leader was satisfied with responsible employees. The conditions for such positive experiences seemed to be that each leader had a limited number of subordinates, that these were working at a limited number of sites and that the leader was ambulant and travelled between these sites. However, such a nomadic lifestyle was demanding. E-mail and telephone were frequently used and virtual meetings, mainly telephone-conferences, was employed, but regular face-to-face contact was still perceived as necessary (Bjørnholt, 2002 b).

The second study was done just after the reorganization, and our results mirrored that the organization was still fluid (Bjørnholt & Heen, 2004). Due to the more dispersed organization and a new leadership structure, a substantial part of employees and leaders were in distant work situations. We found that responsibility for distance workers was unclear, and observed tendencies towards fragmentation of local work communities. It was, however, impossible to separate consequences of distance work from general organizational issues. Often distance work seemed to enlarge more general problems. The control span had for instance increased, and demands due to having many subordinates were enlarged when they were working in different localities.

A third study (Bjørnholt & Heen, 2007) focused on leadership, and revealed that a large majority of the leaders in the organization lead at distance, the number of subordinates varying from a handful of distant workers to more than twenty. Leaders of dispersed units may have subordinates in several places as well, and the nomadic lifestyle, which was still perceived as important to keep contact with employees, remained a challenge. It was, however, difficult to separate the distant leader aspect from the other profound changes in the conditions for leadership.

In the Road Authorities, the circumstances leading to distance work differed from the other two cases. Here distant work emerged as a consequence of a more comprehensive reorganisation. Most of the necessary communication technology was already in place

and used on a day-to day basis. Even if there was a certain amount of attention towards new communication technology, especially videoconferences, technology was never a main focus.

2. Reflections

Our three cases represent different models, each more or less typical of their time, at least in a Norwegian context. The three cases illustrate the historical development of and change of focus in research in distant work, as described by (Bergum, 2005).The first case, Sunnaas hospital, represents the early stages of distant work. The initiative was taken within the organization and distant work developed as a spin off from a more general project aimed at improving internal work conditions. In the distance work projects, adaptation of new technical solutions was a main focus.

The second case may be seen as transitional. Distant work was used as a means to help staff cope after an organizational reform. The initiative came from employees who faced inconveniences such as increased distance to their work-place. The means chosen were mainly small scale and individual distant work solutions, such as home offices and mobile offices, in combination with flexible arrangements for pregnant employees and parents on parental leave.

The third case, the Roads Administration is in many respects of a qualitatively different kind. One difference is scale; this organization is much larger, still employing approximately 4500 persons after the split up and down-scaling. A further contrast is that distant work is not restricted to a few exceptional people or units, but distance work implied in the dispersed structure was a basic organizing trait of the organization. In addition it was being launched as a possible way of manning the new headquarters. It was also seen as a means to obtain several (not necessarily compatible) goals such as decentralization, modern leadership styles including empowerment and self-management of employees, and increased efficiency. The reform has created a complex organization, in which the decoupling of geographical and organizational levels and the emergence of new, geographically dispersed and functionally heterogeneous units, go along with new models of collective leadership and several other reforms from the New Public Management repertoire.

Organisation as politics, fashions and fads
It is well documented that organisational change is often driven by a need for legitimacy and an attractive "image" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Røvik, 1998) and ICT is usually seen as the spearhead of modern technology and efficiency. In general, changes like distance work, flexibility, decentralization and self-management, are better for the image than privatisation and downsizing. There are also quite heavy economic interests in promoting the use of ICT, as well as of particular, licensed organizational receipts and tools, and a number of different firms and consultants are actively trying to sell their solutions as a means for improving efficiency and solving organisational problems. There are in other words quite heavy forces behind the introduction of ICT and distance work.

The conditions have changed, however, not least due to change of political paradigms as well as shifts in organizational fashions and leadership models. In Sunnaas; the new leader of the board declaring that organizational research and development had to be externally financed, personify this change in management models. In the Labour Inspectorate; when the inspection policy was changed due to obligatory internal control in the industries, less focus was put upon improving the inspectors' working conditions. Finally, The Road Authorities represent a more complex story: In the first phase of reorganization, politicians proclaimed that organizational aims were to be reached through extensive use of flexible work and distant work. Internally, however, the attitude towards distant work was ambiguous among the top leaders. There was resistance towards home-offices, and individual distant work permissions were mainly granted as a transitional arrangement before employees were expected to move to the location of their organizational unit. The fact that the new and dispersed structure implied a substantial amount of permanent distant work was not taken fully into account, but it was nevertheless soon internalised as a normal way of working.

This supports the hypotheses that distance work has become a "normal" way to work. We will raise the question, however, if the rapid normalization has blurred the special challenges of managing distant work relations. Maybe leaders and employees who work within such dispersed structures might make use of some of the results of previous research on distant work. On the other hand, there is also a question whether the distant work terminology grasps the complexity of dispersed organizations.

Top-down or bottom-up?
In all three cases, distant work has been developed partly based on top-down, and partly on bottom-up initiatives. For the first two cases bottom-up strategies played a larger role, and leaders, even if in principle positive towards new technology and fashionable virtual work forms, were ambiguous towards further development and dispersion of these. An extreme example was the chairwoman's instruction to reduce the doctor's use of telephones and the Internet in Sunnaas, which was however ignored both by administration and medical staff.

In the Labour Inspection, the main activity, home offices, was the inspectors' initiative, and the "child-bearers infiltration" of the project was an even clearer initiative from below. In the Roads Administration, home offices were part of fringe benefits for employees before organizational reform, but in the process of reorganization towards a dispersed organization, home offices were explicitly declared not to be part of the distant work strategy, and distant work was redefined to mean employees who were located in other units than where they organizationally belonged. Home offices still exist, but not as a part of the main strategy of distant work.

The new organization in the Roads Administration was the result of a heavy top-down, politically led process, where politicians overruled even the top leaders regarding the location of headquarters. The resulting dispersed structure and distant work relations as a permanent organizational trait were unintended effects of a conglomerate of policy choices and organizational changes. During the process of reorganization, there were also

bottom-up initiatives planning for smooth functioning of the new and more dispersed organization. Knudsen led an internal project group with participants from different parts of the organization as well as from trade unions. In this process the bottom-up initiative was of a more reactive kind than in the two other cases, trying to adapt to, and reduce costs and possible problems in the new and distant-working organization. But neither the suggestions for organizational adjustment nor the proposed training to prepare leaders for their new working conditions were implemented, and when the new organizational structure was introduced the different units and leaders had to cope as best they could,.

Distant work and leadership
During the period described, all three organisations, like the rest of the public sector, were subject to radical organisational transformations emphasizing efficiency, improved quality and a more flexible public sector. Increased use of ICT, both internally, between organizations and in relation to the public, is seen as a means towards an improved public sector. In this perspective, distance work is just a part of arrangements that ICT makes possible.

In the public sector, there is documented that the intended consequences of a number of reforms, like delegation, flexibility, decentralised responsibility for results etc. often is accompanied by an increase in other types of control and report systems which undo what is sought in the first place (Berg, Heen, & Hovde, 2002). Regarding leadership roles, less emphasis is put on direct control functions and more on other aspects of being a leader. A general experience with distant work is a need to delegate responsibility for the work done, as close surveillance is impossible, which would be in line with the more general tendency. Some studies have mentioned lack of control as a problem (Bergum, 2005; Tegnander, 2000), but the experiences from the Roads Administration do not confirm this. It is also possible that the question of control is more pressing in cases of home-offices, and in many public agencies there seem to be a reluctance to allow employees to work from home on a regular (but restricted) base, for instance once a week (Bjørnholt, 2002 a).

In modern leadership thinking, the leaders' role as a "team leader" and motivator is often emphasised. The personal relations between leader and employee is stressed, and to "be seen" by the leader is important by employees in many modern organizations (Sørhaug, 2004). We found that the Roads Administration conformed to this, as almost all the leaders meant that all subordinated needed personal contact with their leader (Bjørnholt & Heen, 2007). This can be more difficult to obtain from a distance.

Concluding remarks
One question which the cases raise is whether it is meaningful to talk about distance-work or telework as a specific phenomenon, or if dispersed work arrangements are better understood as aspects of more comprehensive work relations or work situations. The distributed work forms we find in the Road Authorities are very different from telemedicine or home-offices, and a number of the actual research questions are tied to the specific type of work and its organizational setting.

On the other hand, it seems that geographical distance between co-workers and between leaders and subordinates may create problems in itself, often pointed at by concepts like communication, trust, culture etc, eg. issues where meeting face-to face convey information and help building relations which seem difficult to obtain in other ways. We have also mentioned distant leadership as a special issue, which is an argument for seeing distance work as a meaningful concept. On the other hand, these issues are not restricted to communication within an organization, but may be even more pressing when different organizations have to cooperate to fulfil common tasks, which has become increasingly common over the years (see for instance Hildrum, 2007). If we include such interorganisational cooperation as examples of distance work, it becomes difficult to know where to draw the line. This makes us argue that the use of "distance work" as a general concept, drawing a border between "distant work" on one hand and "not distant work" on the other, may not be a constructive analytical approach for the future study of distance in work relations. We rather see it as more fruitful to include "distance" as an aspect of many different work situations.

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