

# Higher job mobility – reduced sick leave?

## Summary of

## Høyere jobbmobilitet – lavere sykefravær?

## Fafo-rapport 2016:28

In this study, we have investigated whether a job change may be a suitable measure for employees with long or frequent sickness absence when it is unlikely that they will return to their original job. We have studied a sample of municipalities in Norway where changing jobs is one of several measures in following up those on sick leave. A job change in this context means changing jobs within or outside the municipality even though for many people a job change within the municipality is probably most relevant.

In the following, we summarise the opportunities and limitations encountered by the municipalities in the study when considering a job change as a possible measure in following up sickness absence. We also examine the experiences they have of partners such as the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and GPs when a job change is an appropriate solution for those on sick leave.

The time aspect is an important criterion for success. The earlier action is taken, the greater the chance of success.

In order to reach good solutions, openness and a good dialogue are essential not only between the employer and the employee but also between other actors involved such as the GP and NAV. The managers of the individual unit are particularly important, since it is here efforts to achieve greater job mobility must be implemented for the most part. Managers must dare to ask the person on sick leave difficult questions and make it clear that permanent adaptation of the work is not possible. Therefore, it can be important to motivate employees towards change in the form of changing jobs or improving their skills. It is vital to show compassion and exercise caution in such cases. Workplaces characterised by openness and trust between managers and employees provide managers with valuable knowledge about the challenges faced by the individual employee. Such knowledge helps to ensure that managers can initiate adaptation measures or begin a dialogue on job mobility at an early stage.

In accordance with Norwegian legislation, employers have a broad but not absolute obligation to provide adaptation for employees who for various reasons meet challenges in their work and risk being certified as sick or falling out of the labour market. This obligation applies regardless of the reason for sickness absence. At many workplaces, there is a considerable amount of adaptation, and often for unnecessarily long periods. In addition to the employer's adaptation obligation, employees have a separate obligation to contribute to a good working environment and to find good solutions to their own sickness absence. Many employers are aware of the existence of this obli-

gation and enter into binding agreements with employees regarding the employee's contribution to finding good solutions to long-term or frequent sickness absence. Our study indicates that when the person certified as sick is involved in finding solutions, it sometimes transpires that the best solution may be to change jobs.

Prior to a job change, employees must normally undergo a work assessment and a mapping of their skills in order to establish whether he/she will be able to master a new job. Often the employee is offered a trial work period in a type of enterprise that might be suitable if changing jobs. It can be challenging to 'sell' such employees to other enterprises. With tight budgets and stringent requirements for productivity and efficiency, employees with a history of sickness absence risk being regarded as under-productive labour. If enterprises are opposed to employing such staff, HR departments have rarely any counter-measures at their disposal. If the host unit has to pay for the trial period, it may be reluctant to take part. The trial period may entail extra work for the new manager and extra financial costs that have not been taken into account in the budget. For this reason, it is vital that the employee has undergone a thorough review of work capacity and a mapping of their skills so that the host unit knows what to expect.

If a job change is on the agenda, small municipalities appear to have an advantage in comparison with larger municipalities since they have a broader and better overview of any job vacancies in the municipality. They can also more rapidly match a vacancy with an employee who needs to change jobs. A number of municipalities have a centralised job bank, which provides a good overview of vacancies. Good communication and collaboration between managers across enterprises also appear to be a prerequisite in such cases. Informal dialogues between managers can also clarify whether changing jobs across enterprises may be a possible solution.

Most municipalities employ job mobility in cases where sickness absence is based on documented health challenges rather than using it as a preventive measure.

For job mobility to be successful, it is crucial that the employees themselves want this or are motivated to want it. Making the kind of transition a job change entails will demand both motivation and courage in many cases. Therefore, it is vital that these employees have managers that offer them support and security.

For some people, it may be of interest to check job opportunities outside the municipality, e.g. in the private sector where there may be jobs that are better suited to the employee's health challenges. However, the job security that many believe the municipality can offer, as well as good pension schemes, for example, may stop a number of employees from considering other options. Consequently, they may stay in jobs that do not improve their health situation, and perhaps continue to have a high level of sickness absence.

Good dialogue between the employer, the employee, NAV and the employee's GP is essential in job mobility cases. Too often it is assumed that employees will return to their original job, even when the diagnosis is not compatible with their original

position. In these cases, it is important that the employer, NAV and the GP consider alternative solutions at an early stage and collaborate on commencing a dialogue about this with the employee in order to find alternative solutions early on.

The lack of vacant, relevant positions internally in the municipality is a challenge, particularly if the municipality has undergone downsizing. This means that in addition to those on sick leave, positions must also be found for the group of employees who have been made redundant. A low staff turnover rate also means fewer relocation opportunities internally in the municipality.

## **NAV**

There is widespread agreement among the municipalities investigated that NAV only contributes to a limited degree to finding a solution in cases of sickness absence where it is unlikely that the sick person will return to their original job. According to the municipalities, NAV expects the employer to make more adaptations to the original workplace than are deemed realistic, and has little focus on whether a new workplace and/or new job might be a solution in some cases. The municipalities have the view that NAV's practices in such cases vary considerably between the different NAV offices and between case officers.

The municipalities are of the opinion that NAV should offer retraining measures as early as the first year of sickness where there is little or no probability that the person on sick leave will return to his/her original job. This would benefit both the employees and employers.

## **Doctors**

A challenge related to the practices of doctors vis-à-vis people on long-term sick leave is that doctors report employees as fit to return to a job they are unable to cope with. Employers in the municipalities think that doctors are too preoccupied with pointing out the employer's obligation to adapt, without knowing much about what adaptation options are available at the individual workplace. The municipalities believe that doctors are too prone to viewing the challenges for the patient as solely the responsibility of the employer. They would like to see doctors considering the employer's perspective as well as the patient's perspective.

## **Employee representatives**

In general, employers in the municipalities believe that employee representatives are positive to job mobility in cases of long-term sickness absence because they realise that long absences and substantial adaptation can impact on colleagues. Meanwhile

employers find that employee representatives can sometimes delay the process by advising employees against resigning from a secure position in the municipality even though from a health perspective this would perhaps be best for the employee. Employee representatives, however, appear to be positive to job mobility, believing that it should be afforded more attention as a long-term sickness absence measure. They feel that job mobility measures should have a stronger underpinning among employee representatives since the latter have a good insight into what is going on at the individual workplace and in the municipality as a whole.