

English summary
of Fafo-report 2019:07

From lofty ideals to reality
The use of the competence
provisions in the collective
agreements in the private
sector

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A Fafo project in 2017 investigated the role of the collective agreements as an instrument for competence policies in the private sector. In this project we have attempted to go one step further and elicit the perspectives of the central-level trade union and employer organisations regarding the actual use of the competence provisions. What is needed to convert competence development from a lofty ideal into reality?

New technology, digitisation and robotisation challenge the enterprises' ability to restructure and develop competence, and give rise to a whole set of new questions. Who should monitor the driverless buses of the future, and what happens to the cashiers when a growing number of supermarkets introduce self-service check-outs? What kind of competence-related challenges are the social partners referring to in the various tariff areas, and what do they believe is needed in order to succeed with competence enhancement? Are new funding schemes for continuing education and training the key to competence enhancement, and are the partners' interests in harmony or in conflict?

To answer these and other questions we have interviewed representatives of trade unions and employers' associations at the central level in ten different tariff areas. In addition, we will present the results from six questions related to competence enhancement in a survey of the NTUC panel of elected trade union representatives.

The project results can be summarised by noting that many enterprises have fewer employees than before, and these will consequently need to be able to cope with a wider field of activity. In particular, requirements for computer skills have increased, including in enterprises where the jobs previously tended to be done manually. Both social partners are equally concerned with raising efficiency in order to safeguard jobs. As regards the application of the competence agreements locally, there are large variations and maintaining an overview is frequently difficult at the central level. Many enterprises respect the 'spirit' of the agreements, even though the trade union representatives and the management may not have studied them in detail. Enterprises may find it difficult to describe their competence needs,

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and systematic competence screenings of the employees are not undertaken everywhere. Despite the fact that competence development may be discontinuous and proceed in leaps, there appears to be a substantial ability to undertake quick restructuring and competence development in the wake of major technological shifts or legal amendments. Time constraints in daily operations and the limited number of workers present in the workplace are described as the main reasons why so few have the opportunity to attend continuing education and training activities. The threshold for attending continuing education programmes appears to be high if the employee deems this to be detrimental to the enterprise's productivity in the short term. Even in enterprises with otherwise well-functioning cooperation, succeeding fully with collaboration on competence enhancement may present difficulties, and the trade union representatives may not always know where to start. Furthermore, short-term concerns such as rosters, working hours and wages may often take higher priority than competence enhancement. Over the last nine years, the Dispute Resolution Board has addressed relatively few cases concerning the right to educational leave. The trade unions have informed us, however, that the employers occasionally need to be reminded of the regulations. In other words, it appears that continuing education and training efforts are not hindered by any lack of regulations, but that the limitations rather are found in the practical application of the regulations and in the perseverance with which the demands for allocation of time for competence enhancement are put forward.

The established funding schemes for continuing education and training appear to attract little controversy. However, the employers' associations have consistently opposed the establishment of further funding schemes for this purpose. Part of the reason may be that the employers' associations are apprehensive of losing control of these funds should new schemes be established. Apart from some disagreement concerning the establishment of further funding schemes for continuing education and training, it appears that the social partnership in the area of competence enhancement is far more an arena for collaboration and mutual interest than a scene for negotiation between two opposing parties. In order to succeed with competence enhancement, it will be crucial to make use of the employees' practical experience as a resource in the training programmes, preferably with participation by groups of employees from the same enterprise. For the trade unions, a programme for craft certificates and funding schemes accompanied by facilitation could be a suitable instrument for increasing the unionisation

rate. Many of our informants described the entitlement to competence enhancement as an area that might become a source of more conflicts in the future – especially in periods of downsizing and restructuring. Continuously updated competence could serve as insurance against being re-garded as outdated and expendable, for enterprises and individual employees alike. On the other hand, the time spent on competence enhancement activities must be balanced against the need to maintain production levels.

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