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Digitalisation, work environment and personal integrity at work

Today, digitalisation is being introduced on a large scale in the Swedish welfare sector, often without analysing the consequences for the work environment. This article presents the results of a survey carried out by Kommunal,[1] one of Sweden's largest trade unions, focusing on trade union safety representatives' involvement when employers introduce new digital systems and surveillance techniques in workplaces. It seems that safety representatives are to a large extent excluded from decision-making, planning and impact assessments, even though workers' personal integrity is affected. For Kommunal the first step is to train members in how to combine the general principles of EU data protection, Swedish labour law and collective agreements in order to strengthen workers' right to personal integrity and to limit employers' monitoring of work.

In tech we trust

In the coming decade the Swedish welfare sector will face major challenges due to the ageing population. At the same time, the labour force is shrinking as a share of the total population, resulting in reduced tax revenues. Looking at the demand side, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) estimates that welfare services need to recruit around 500,000 new employees: almost 200,000 to compensate for demographic change and more than 300,000 employees because of retirement (SALAR, 2018: 23). The results are consistent with the skills forecast carried out by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Education and Training (Cedefop, 2017).

Seen from the supply side, Statistics Sweden estimates increasing labour shortages among welfare professionals (Statistics Sweden, 2017: 44). At the same time, because of the poor working conditions, about 25 per cent of Kommunal's members in elderly care are considering changing their occupation (Wondmeneh, 2018: 4).

In this situation digitalisation is regarded as one important solution to the labour shortage. SALAR hopes that the improved efficiency achieved by technological developments will replace more than 70,000 employees (SALAR, 2018: 35).

Digitalisation in the workplace

In 2016 the Swedish government and SALAR agreed on a joint vision for health care and social services called 'Vision e-health 2025', aimed at becoming a world leader in the use of eHealth and digitalisation (Swedish Government, 2017). According to the vision, the municipalities and regions will be responsible for actions related to the organisation, management, planning and

1 Kommunal is one of Sweden's largest trade unions with more than 500,000 members working in more than 200 different occupations in 13 fields, including elderly and disability care, schools and day care centres, health and medical care, parks, maintenance and road construction, and rescue services.

development of social services. The state will be responsible for regulations and standards. To speed up the process the government last year allocated €35m to the project at local and regional level (Swedish Government, 2018: 154).

Facing a strong digitalisation drive, including widespread use of information and communications technology (ICT), there is a growing need to develop new trade union strategies to safeguard their members' rights to personal integrity and privacy at work. For example, employers are already compelled to follow the Swedish Work Environment Act (AML, 1977: 1160) and negotiate in accordance with the Act on Co-determination at Work (MBL, 1976: 580). Additionally, there is new EU legislation on camera surveillance (EU Directive 2016/680, 27 April 2016) and on data protection (General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR).

The question is, how can Kommunal use the EU legislation both to safeguard workers' personal information and to strengthen trade union organisation of health and safety in the workplace? For example, it may be possible to use the Swedish Data Protection Authority's checklist, focusing on legal grounds, accuracy and transparency (GDPR principles) when negotiating the introduction of new digital systems that enable the collection, monitoring and processing of personal information at work.

A survey of digitalisation's effects on the work environment – method and materials

The increasing use of digital systems and surveillance techniques has raised Kommunal's concerns, as it affects many of its occupations and members. However, to date there are few analyses of the impact on the working environment. Recently, new EU regulations (data protection and camera surveillance) were implemented on the Swedish labour market, where employers are obliged to present documentation on the grounds for collecting workers' personal information.

To learn more about the challenges in workplaces, Kommunal designed a survey on workplace digitalisation and surveillance. The population was set to include all senior safety representatives with registered mobile phone or email, and all regional safety representatives with registered email (Spånt Enbuske, 2019a).

In early August 2018 Kommunal's 13 regional offices received information on the survey and two weeks later almost 1400 senior safety representatives (public or large private employers) received a text message and about 140 regional safety representatives (small private employers) received an email with a link to the web survey. Two weeks later a reminder was sent by email to 1280 senior safety representatives and about 140 regional safety representatives.

A total of 832 representatives completed the survey, a response rate of 57 per cent (see Appendix Table A1 for more detailed information about the respondents).

Results

The main findings are as follows: (i) issues related to the work environment are often excluded when digital techniques are introduced; (ii) the introduction and implementation of digital systems are not on the agenda of safety bodies; (iii) knowledge is lacking among the safety representatives about the impact of surveillance; (iv) there is substantial variation of experience of surveillance across domains; (v) there is a need to empower workers and limit employers' monitoring of work.

Table 1. Are you involved in the planning and needs analysis in connection with the choice and purchase of a new digital system in the given field of activities?

Involvement in decision-making	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	148	18
No	624	75
Don't know	60	7
Total	832	100

Source: Spånt Enbuske (2019a).

Trade union involvement and workplace participation

The majority of safety representatives were not involved in the planning and needs analysis of digital systems. A minority worked with employers in carrying out impact assessments and believed that the employers included the results in their decision-making when implementing new digital systems (Table 1).

The safety representatives' involvement varied between fields. For example, the safety representatives in public transport were involved in both decision-making and impact assessments. In their experience, the employers took the results into consideration before introducing a new digital system. Schools and day care is another field in which safety representatives were to a large extent involved in decision-making, although they rarely participated in impact assessments, which the employers seldom carried out. Another example is rescue services, in which the safety representatives were rarely involved in decision-making, but participated to a large extent in the impact assessments.

Before introducing new digital systems employers can either negotiate in accordance with the Act on Co-determination at Work or cooperate on health and safety (public sector). Another alternative is to sign a local collective agreement. Also, the Swedish Work Environment Act states that all organisational changes must follow procedure, with an impact assessment within the framework of social dialogue.

The most striking result is that a majority of the safety representatives knew neither whether negotiations had taken place nor whether Kommunal had signed a local collective agreement. A possible explanation of this is that the use of negotiations according to the Act on Co-determination at Work is most commonly used in private companies and at Samhall[2] as well as among religion-based employers, while the public sector cooperates on health and safety matters.

The use of work surveillance and monitoring

Over the past couple of years Kommunal has received reports of increasing use of work surveillance, for example using GPS tracking systems and camera surveillance on public transport or apps on private and work-related smartphones.

When asked about the situation, 30 per cent of the safety representatives acknowledged surveillance at members' workplaces, about half of the respondents answered that there was no surveillance and nearly 25 per cent did not know whether the employers used surveillance at the workplaces in their safety area (Table 2).

2 A state-owned enterprise.

Table 2. Do you know of any surveillance at the workplaces in your safety area?

Surveillance at the workplace	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	249	30
No	389	47
Don't know	194	23
Total	832	100

Source: Spånt Enbuske (2019a).

Surveillance is most commonly used at male-dominated workplaces. At rescue services and public transport, a majority of the safety representatives are aware of surveillance at work. They are the two fields in which the use of GPS tracking, entry and exit controls, as well as camera surveillance are most commonly used. All personal information collected is supposed to be processed in accordance with the provisions laid down by GDPR. Furthermore, before installing cameras there is a duty to negotiate, as well as an option to sign a collective agreement (Rehnström, 2017: 1).

Surveillance was least common in female-dominated workplaces, such as schools and day care. The survey shows a surprisingly low degree of surveillance in elderly care, which might be explained by the safety representatives failing to recognise ICT as a tracking device to monitor time and work performance (Table 3).

According to the regulations, when introducing surveillance techniques employers must inform the employees about their motives. The survey shows that this is done at the majority of workplaces (about 70 per cent). A comparison between fields of activity does not show major disparities.

When introducing surveillance at work it is crucial to demonstrate that there are compelling legitimate grounds for that measure, and to limit strictly the number of persons who are authorised to study the collected data, as well as to limit the use of that data to the primary purpose of that surveillance. According to the survey, however, this is not the case. When using surveillance fewer than 50 per cent of the safety representatives report strict rules on authorisation.

Similarly, it is important whether surveillance takes place in real time or not. According to the respondents, this is the situation at about half of workplaces. But many safety representatives (30 per cent) found it difficult to answer the question. Public transport sticks out, which can be explained by GPS tracking systems, where travellers can follow the vehicles in real time using an app.

Being able to turn off the surveillance device is also important. According to the respondents this was possible at 10 per cent of workplaces. For a majority this was impossible, 60 per cent, mainly due to built-in work devices. About 25 per cent of respondents could not answer the question.

Impact on the perceived work environment

The safety representatives described a situation characterised by severe negative effects on the work environment due to surveillance. These effects include a feeling of stress and monitoring of time keeping, as well as work, visualised in the following word cloud (Figure 1).

The feeling of being monitored, controlled and interrogated is frequently mentioned by the safety representatives. Unfortunately, the introduction of ICT in elderly care has resulted in a system of control (Bergschöld, 2018) and interrogation of performance, instead of improving work processes and quality of services (Spånt Enbuske, 2019b).

Table 3. If yes, what kinds of surveillance techniques are used? Multiple choices possible.

	Rescue services (n = 23)		Public transport (n = 55)		Elderly care (n = 113)		Total (n = 249)	
Surveillance techniques	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Control of work performance	7	30	16	29	43	38	76	31
Entry and exit controls	10	43	24	44	60	53	116	47
Camera surveillance	12	52	37	67	27	24	88	35
GPS tracking	17	74	42	76	60	53	141	57
Systematic querying of time reports	3	13	3	5	20	18	38	15
Listening in	-	-	1	2	2	2	4	2
Other	1	4	5	9	8	7	16	6

Source: Spånt Enbuske (2019a).

Figure 1. In what way has surveillance had a negative impact on the work environment?
Source: Spånt Enbuske (2019a).

Table 4. Have new digital technologies affected members' personal integrity?

Personal integrity at the workplace	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	193	23
No	221	27
Don't know	418	50
Total	832	100

Source: Spånt Enbuske (2019a).

In elderly care and, particularly, home help services workers' everyday activities are monitored by the minute, resulting in a loss of focus on the person in need of the service and a feeling that workers' professional skills are being called into question. In response, experienced workers are leaving the profession due to health issues or in search of better working conditions in other sectors.

Personal integrity at work and privacy at home

Personal integrity refers to the various attributes of the life of a person. It can be physical, professional, mental, artistic, psychological etc. Elements impacting personal integrity include both digital systems at work enabling data collection in order to measure work performance, tracking and surveillance, but also digital apps on private smartphones used for communications between employer and employee around the clock.

Concerning whether it has affected members' personal integrity answers were equally divided. However, many respondents found it difficult to answer whether new digital technologies were affecting workers' personal integrity (Table 4).

Experience varies across fields. Within rescue services more than 50 per cent of the safety representatives report an effect on personal integrity at work. This is not surprising because surveillance is widely used in equipment such as fire engines and in workplaces.

The general view (75 per cent of respondents) is that new digital technology has had an adverse effect on personal integrity in the workplace. On the other hand, 25 per cent of respondents have experienced an improvement. According to the comments one crucial point seems to be whether

the workers have received information and understand the purpose of surveillance in the workplace.

A need to strengthen workers' rights

The results show an acute need to empower workers in relation to digitalisation and threats to personal integrity at work. In this context the introduction of digital systems can be seen as an opportunity to develop bargaining structures and collective agreements to tackle key issues concerning new working methods and the transformation of work.

Swedish regulations and labour laws are already in place. First, the use of personal data is protected by the GDPR. Second, all organisational changes must follow the procedure laid down in the Swedish Work Environment Act. Third, all changes in work methods and work organisation could entail negotiations in accordance with the Act on Co-determination at Work, which includes workers' right to reskilling.

Furthermore, the social partners need to update their study materials on rights and obligations. For example, the organisation Suntarbetsliv[3] has introduced a checklist on digital safety inspections, including both impact assessments and digital infrastructure in the workplace. As for Kommunal, the survey has shown a need to update strategies and guidelines on personal integrity at work and regularly to inform and train the safety organisation and trade union representatives on the importance of including digitalisation in the social dialogue. Embracing the GDPR and strengthening workers' personal integrity will, it is to be hoped, improve working conditions and attract professionals to the welfare sector. This will tackle the labour shortage and safeguard welfare services.

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3 Suntarbetsliv is a joint organisation of the social partners, with a mission to gather knowledge about prevention, health promotion and rehabilitation methods and to disseminate this information to workplaces in Swedish municipalities and regions.

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Appendix

Table A1. Background information on the respondents in the survey.

Background information	Frequency	Percentage
Assignment		
Senior safety representative	691	83
Regional safety representative	90	11
Both senior and regional safety representative	43	5
Other	8	1
Years of experience on the assignment		
Fewer than 2 years	352	42
2–5 years	259	31
More than 5 years	221	26
Training on a regular basis		
Yes	430	52
No	311	37
Don't know	91	11
Employer (multiple choice)		
Public employer	688	76
Private employer	192	21
Not-for-profit employer	29	3

Source: Spånt Enbuske (2019a).

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