



International Relations as a Tool for Developing the Municipal Employees

Examples from Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands

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Preface

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Many municipalities – both in Denmark and abroad – have international strategies. Often, the basis is that international cooperation can lead to a better service for the citizens and, generally, create a more attractive municipality in which to live. But international work can also contribute to results other than the welfare of the *citizens*, namely the welfare of the *employees*. An international municipality is also an attractive workplace.

This publication has been prepared on the basis of conversations by e-mail and by telephone with international coordinators in five municipalities abroad and their stories about experiences with international work and the thoughts behind them. These conversations provide a good picture of how international work can contribute to creating an attractive workplace. The examples are from our neighbours in Norway, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands.

A common denominator for the municipalities in this publication is that international activities seem to develop the employees and make them more competent. International work provides new and interesting tasks and fruitful meetings between cultures which form the basis for new ideas and understanding. This is the way in which international work contributes to making the municipality an attractive workplace.

Employee development has been a "positive side effect" that we have noted along the way. Several municipalities are considering using this fact more strategically than before.

The aim of the publication is that it should serve as an inspiration to ways in which international activities may contribute to making Danish municipalities attractive workplaces.

Ms. Maja Brink Jensen from the EU Office of Local Government Denmark has been responsible for collecting the examples and for editing the publication.

We hope that you will find the publication interesting!

Best regards

Local Government Denmark (LGDK)
EU Office

Sagene in Oslo – learning across country borders

In the district Sagene in Oslo there is major focus on employees continuously learning new things and improving their skills. One way to learn new things is to broaden your view. In this way international work contributes to making Sagene an attractive place to work. When it comes down to it, more competent and satisfied employees are a benefit for children and youth in Sagene.

Sagene is one of the 15 parts of the City of Oslo and it has approx. 30,500 inhabitants. It is responsible for children and youth, social services and health as well as culture and the close environment.

The employees in the Department of Children and Youth are responsible for all the offers for children and youth at the age of 0-18. Consequently, the department has many different tasks. They are responsible for kindergartens, a large health station, a child welfare committee, schools and various youth activities.

Focus on learning from each other – also across country borders

In the Department of Children and Youth in Sagene, constant focus is on learning new things and on teaching. Interdisciplinary cooperation across the units in the department has always been good. Some years ago, the management group decided to start looking at the rest of Europe to see what they could learn there. The idea is that if you can learn from each other by cooperating across units, then you can also learn a lot from cooperating with colleagues abroad.

The management group is of the opinion that if you cannot compete on wages, then work with a development potential can contribute to ensuring that the employees in Sagene *stay* in Sagene because they thrive! In addition, the prospect of working in an organisation with focus on employee development – e.g. through international activities – could be the decisive element to attract new employees.

It is the experience of the Department of Children and Youth in Sagene that employees prefer working where development and improvement of their skills are an option.

At the end of the day, it is a fact that when employees become more competent and broaden their horizons, then the offers for children and youth in Sagene also become much better!

Employees and international work

The European perspective is a very important element in employee development. In EU projects, there are many partners with different approaches, experiences and ideas. In this way, employees receive input from others outside the municipality and the country. The employees also teach others, and this process leads to sound reflection on their own tasks.

In Sagene they are planning to include international tasks in the job description in job advertisements. Mentioning the international work that takes place in Sagene may also serve as a means to attract manpower.

In Sagene they are convinced that international work will bear fruit in the long term – in other words it is a long term strategy. In addition to the professional benefit, it also gives both managers and employees more knowledge of project work and how to apply for financial support.

Examples of international work in Sagene – projects and exchange

Sagene participates in various EU projects, including the CAMHEE project, Child and Adolescent Mental Health in Enlarged EU. Furthermore, Sagene participates in projects under the EU programme called Leonardo da Vinci. The below-mentioned examples from the ASSIST project and various mobility projects are part of the Leonardo da Vinci programme.

A learning model for Europe

Sagene manages an EU project called ASSIST – structured in service-training for pre-school assistants and pre-school teachers.

In cooperation with the University of Oslo, Sagene has created a training programme for pre-school teachers and pre-school assistants enabling them to train their colleagues as part of their daily work. The training programme is also aimed at visiting nurses and physiotherapists. In this way professional development can be created between different professional groups and between skilled and unskilled employees in the individual kindergarten (the so-called Sagene model).

The idea behind the ASSIST programme is to develop the model further and to spread it to other countries in a form that fits local needs. The unit managers (in charge of 3-4 kindergartens) and managers in the individual kindergarten are involved in the project. This means that they participate in partner meetings with their peers in for example Dortmund or Milan where they exchange experiences, learn from each other and develop the training programme together. Some times they go abroad and some times they receive visitors. The meetings with colleagues from abroad provide new knowledge both for the training programme and for improvement of daily work routines.

The training programme is in itself a means to retain managers and employees in the kindergartens and to make them more satisfied with their work.

Exchange of employees – Norwegians abroad and foreigners in Sagene

Sagene also exchanges employees for a duration of up to three months. The exchange may involve one employee or a group of employees, e.g. a visiting nurse goes to Nørrebro in Copenhagen. Other exchanges are financed by the Leonardo da Vinci programme where teachers and students visit other schools and Sagene receives visitors and tell them about their daily work.

Through this exchange programme, employees gain new knowledge and ideas and get the opportunity to present their own work, and last but not least, this creates a professional network across country borders.

Read more about Sagene

www.bydel-sagene.oslo.kommune.no

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Municipality of Kalmar – international work creates opportunities

In the Municipality of Kalmar they are very aware of the opportunities involved in international projects. EU projects provide the opportunity to create a better environment in the Baltic region. Young European volunteers provide input in every day life and you can contribute to making a difference in Uganda. International work is a means to develop the municipality and the employees by creating a challenging and inspiring working environment.

Kalmar is located in the eastern part of Småland near the Baltic Sea and Öland. The Municipality of Kalmar has 61,500 inhabitants. The main town is Kalmar, which is on the coast, and in addition there are a number of smaller towns further inland.

International work – to the benefit of the municipality and the employees

International work is important in the Municipality of Kalmar both politically and for the individual employee. International work is primarily projects financed by funds from the EU, the state, the regions or the municipalities that are used as a means to reach the goals in the municipal budget. In other words, international work is used to develop the Municipality of Kalmar and make it an attractive and sustainable municipality. Therefore, the Municipality of Kalmar is very aware of the opportunities available when they apply for financial support from the outside. The subsidies make it possible to invest in projects to the benefit of the municipality as a whole which would otherwise be out of reach.

However, international work also has another advantage for Kalmar. It makes the municipality a more interesting workplace.

Employees and international work

The idea is that international activities increase the skills of the employees. It is attractive to work in an environment that allows improvement of skills. The projects provide the opportunity to exchange experiences, and the international activities create an inspiring environment where you are challenged by different languages and cultures, new perceptions and ideas. This encourages employees to stay in Kalmar.

Examples of international activities in Kalmar – the many projects

The Municipality of Kalmar is involved in EU projects, and many of the environmental efforts made by the Municipality of Kalmar in the Baltic region are financed by EU funds. Kalmar also participates in development projects supported by SIDA (the governmental Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency). In addition, Kalmar has twin-towns in the Nordic countries, the rest of Europe, but also further away in Russia, the USA and Uganda. And, primary schools, secondary schools and the university in Kalmar have foreign partners.

The development unit in Kalmar is the driving force behind the international activities and it coordinates the many projects, but the actual project work is carried out together with the relevant departments in the municipality.

The development unit – the international driving force in Kalmar

The development unit is in itself international as it includes employees from Sweden, Kosovo, Norway and Turkey. The employees in the development unit often use English in their work. Proficiency in English is therefore essential, and at job interviews there is major emphasis on this particular skill. Travelling is part of the daily work and a source of inspiration and establishment of personal networks. The employees can also be posted abroad, often through the European Voluntary Service. Through

their involvement in various projects, employees in the development unit become highly skilled project managers.

In job advertisements for the development unit it says that the work is very international, and the unit never has any recruitment problems.

European Voluntary Service

Kalmar uses the European Voluntary Service very actively. The European Voluntary Service is part of the EU programme "Active Youth". The idea is that young people between the age of 18-30 can volunteer for work 2-12 months in an organisation abroad, e.g. a municipality. The work is unpaid, but the municipality can receive compensation for the other costs involved in having a volunteer or in sending an employee abroad as a volunteer. A total of 28 volunteers have worked in Kalmar of which ten worked in the municipal organisation.

Kalmar has used the Voluntary Service in connection with the project Tusenet that aims to enforce democracy and human rights in Turkey. An important part of the programme is networks between Swedish and Turkish municipalities. Kalmar is responsible for two networks in the project and cooperates with various municipalities in Turkey. In this connection the development unit has accepted a Turkish volunteer. He is able to contribute both in terms of language and his understanding of how things work in Turkey. This is very valuable for the project, but it also gives the permanent employees ideas, knowledge and experience that they can use in future projects.

Urban planning in Uganda

Kalmar's cooperation with Entebbe, its twin-town in Uganda, is an example of a development project supported by SIDA. Since 2003, Kalmar and Entebbe have completed three projects: An urban planning project, a democracy project and an equality project. In 2008, a project on waste management was ongoing.

In connection with the urban planning project, employees in the municipality of Kalmar involved in urban planning participated. These employees went to Entebbe to explain urban planning and received visitors from Entebbe to show them Kalmar. In this way the daily work of the urban planners in the municipality of Kalmar was supplemented by development of a town in Uganda.

Read more about the Municipality of Kalmar

www.kalmar.se

Municipality of Vara – international work ”permeates” the municipality

In the Municipality of Vara, international activities “permeate” the entire municipality. International work is included in the strategy plan of Vara to ensure that Vara is an attractive municipality to live and work in. International work provides new knowledge and ideas. All the employees in Vara have the opportunity to go abroad at some point in time and to work internationally, e.g. Vara’s study tour abroad every four years, development work in China or visits to schools abroad for teachers.

Vara is located approx. 100 km northeast of Gothenburg. The Municipality of Vara is a mixture of small towns and rural areas. Agriculture is still a major part of local trade and industry, but especially software companies have also emerged in the municipality.

International work – a part of the strategy for the development of Vara

Since the 1990s, international work has been included in the strategy plan of the Municipality of Vara. The plan should ensure that the Municipality of Vara becomes an attractive municipality to live in, but also to work in. International work is therefore aimed at creating development in the municipality and international awareness among the citizens in general and among children and youth in particular, but also at developing employee skills and attracting qualified manpower. A target for the Municipality of Vara is to enhance the status of working for a municipality.

Employees and international work

The Municipality of Vara is very focused on the opportunities involved in participating in EU projects. EU programmes can subsidise projects that provide new knowledge in the municipality, and the employees in the Municipality of Vara can share the knowledge they have. Internationalisation should ”permeate” the municipality. Therefore, all the employees are given the opportunity to be posted abroad at some point in time. When employees go abroad and meet their foreign colleagues, they experience and learn new things. This develops employee creativity and facilitates change. Vara is well known in Sweden for its international work. It is a question of attracting employees even though it is not used directly as a recruitment strategy or included in job advertisements.

Examples of international work in Vara – international employees and citizens

The Municipality of Vara is involved in many different international activities. Vara has six twin-towns and in addition, they cooperate with other countries both in Europe and in South America. At the present time, Vara is also involved in development work with municipalities in India and China.

International contacts create a network for exchange of experience. When you are part of a network, it is easier to find partners for projects and to develop project ideas. An important part of the internationalisation in Vara is aimed at making children and youth in the municipality world citizens. Therefore, the schools in Vara has a network of sister schools.

Development – study tours and development cheque

In addition to the international projects, employees also find inspiration outside the Municipality of Vara when all the employees every four years go on a study tour abroad. In 2001, they went to Mallorca, in 2005 to Iceland and in 2009, they are going to Prague. New ideas are created through concrete experiences together. Furthermore, it improves interaction between the colleagues. At management level, all the 45 managers in the result units receive a development cheque. The managers are supposed to use the cheque to develop their own skills in international work. In this context Vara’s wide network is also very useful.

The English sisters

All the schools in the municipality of Vara have a sister school in its twin city Cherwell in England. The cooperation takes place both at student and at teacher level. The purpose is that the schools should have contacts abroad that can be used educationally. The most important element is regular contact. The students cooperate on various themes and have pen pals. They practice their English language skills and are exposed to another culture. The schools also cooperate in various EU projects.

The school “Västreskolen” in Vara has a particularly close contact with its sister school Hook Norton in Cherwell. On the last Friday of every month, the students meet and talk using a webcam.

“Västreskolen” also accepts exchange students. All the students in the fifth grade are offered the possibility to visit the sister school in England. Twice a year they exchange students. The students leave in the autumn and exchange students from England arrive in the spring. Pairs of students stay with private families and participate in the lessons for five days.

In addition to the cooperation with sister schools in England, the schools also cooperate with schools in other European countries in Vara’s other twin-towns or in connection with EU projects. The Municipality of Vara places great emphasis on school cooperation as students who cooperate with students from other countries improve their language skills, become more motivated and increase their self-esteem.

The Municipality of Vara encourages teachers to visit sister schools and schools in the twin-towns of the municipality. In 2008-2009, teachers and the school administration of the municipality will participate in a project with schools in India. The project is about development within educational theory and practice, including contents of the training. Meetings between the parties involved in the project take place both in India and in Sweden.

Waste management in China

Together with the Municipality of Aalborg in Denmark, the Municipality of Vara participates in a project on waste management in the Chinese municipality Hefei. The project is subsidised by EU. The idea behind the project is to make management of hazardous waste in Hefei more sustainable by combining the best methods from Europe and China. The project is based on exchange of experience and involvement of many different people. Employees, politicians, students, entrepreneurs and citizens have participated and acquired new knowledge and new impressions. Even though the project is aimed at improvement of waste management in Hefei, people from Vara also bring home good ideas for improvement of their waste management process.

Read more about the municipality of Vara

www.vara.se

City of Amsterdam – targeted international work

Eight years ago, the City of Amsterdam decided to target their international work. This was accomplished by reducing the number of twin-towns and by entering into cooperation agreements with ten selected cities. It was decided to cooperate with cities in those countries where the large minority groups in Amsterdam originated and with cities in the new EU countries. The activities are mainly development projects to help the countries where a large number of the inhabitants of Amsterdam come from. A "positive side effect" of the development projects was that employees in the City of Amsterdam also benefitted from the cooperation. Consequently, the development projects helped make the City of Amsterdam an attractive workplace.

Amsterdam, the capital of the Netherlands, has approx. 750,000 inhabitants. Amsterdam is a cauldron of 175 different nationalities. The municipality is responsible for urban planning, tourism, public transport, social services and health, primary school, the police and culture.

International work based on the ethnic minorities in the city

Six years ago, the city of Amsterdam decided on a more targeted approach to international work. They had 45 twin-towns, but no real cooperation.

The international work was targeted by reducing the number of twin-towns to ten and by making the cooperation more project-oriented. They were no longer called twin-towns, but cooperation agreements. Furthermore, the international cooperation policy was made part of the personnel policy.

The ten cities were selected partly on the basis of the composition of the population in Amsterdam. 45% of the inhabitants of Amsterdam have a background other than Dutch. It was therefore decided to cooperate with cities in the countries where the large minority groups in Amsterdam come from, such as cities in Suriname, Morocco, Turkey, Ghana, the Dutch Antilles and Aruba. In addition, cities in the new EU countries were selected, and Amsterdam has cooperation agreements with Riga, Budapest and Sofia. Amsterdam also cooperates with Beijing where they have a longstanding contract.

The citizens of Amsterdam value the international work being done. It is also important for the municipality of Amsterdam to make the rest of the world aware of municipal tasks and what a municipality can do.

Employees and international work

The aim was first and foremost to show the citizens of Amsterdam and in particular the minorities that they were interested in their home countries and wanted to cooperate with them – develop and help them. International work is about exchange of experience. It is about making expertise available in these countries and helping to promote the development partly because some of their citizens are residents in Amsterdam. But employees from Amsterdam also learn many things as they often come home with ideas for new solutions. Solutions that are far more simple, but just as effective as the very technological solutions we normally come up with.

At the beginning, only three departments were involved in international work. Today, all 36 departments have regular international contact. It ranges from urban planning to health and police issues. The employees are very pleased with the international work. In Amsterdam, they are very aware of the "positive side effect" of international work, namely that Amsterdam becomes an attractive workplace. However, currently it is not included in the recruitment strategy, but it is considered a

distinct possibility in future. Amsterdam still has a reputation of being an internationally oriented municipality which probably contributes to attracting potential employees.

Examples of international work in Amsterdam – project-oriented development activities

In Amsterdam, funds are set aside for cooperation with foreign countries, i.e. 1 euro per inhabitant which amounts to approx. 750,000 euro a year. These funds are primarily used to pay travel expenses, accommodation, etc. The department provides the actual manpower. For the very large projects applications are made for subsidies from the EU. The work mainly involves development projects. In addition to the projects described here, they have worked on a housing project in Suriname, a project with the fire brigade in Mozambique and development of a former gasworks in Budapest in Hungary.

The oil that greases the international engine

Amsterdam has an international office which greases the international engine. It is a small office with four employees that initiate, coordinate and evaluate the projects.

They go abroad, talk to the people, e.g. the Moroccan local authorities and find out what the Moroccans expect from the cooperation. They find the relevant employees who will then be attached to the project. An agreement is signed with a term of four years. When the project has started, the international office makes follow-up and evaluation on an ongoing basis.

The international office also renders assistance if problems arise, e.g. in connection with cultural differences. But the employees from the departments or institutions are the ones actively involved in the project. This means that they go to for example to Morocco to organise workshops and lectures and to establish contacts. When an employee returns home, they keep in contact by e-mail and by telephone. Five months later, the employee takes off again. This is the way to create a sustainable cooperation. Amsterdam makes agreements with a term of four years at a time. This only means that the cooperation is evaluated thoroughly every four years and then the agreement can be renewed. The goal is sustainable cooperation.

Psychiatry: Amsterdam – a return ticket to Suriname

A mental health centre in Amsterdam works closely together with a mental health centre in Suriname. 11% of the population in Amsterdam comes from Suriname. Consequently, the centre has quite a number of clients with a Suriname background. The problem was that the centre often failed to diagnose the Suriname patients correctly as they did not understand their culture. The result of the cooperation is that the centre in Amsterdam has become better at diagnosing the Suriname clients. In addition, the centres exchange patient records so that the centre in Suriname can dispense medication when clients are on holiday in Suriname. In this way they avoid that the clients stop taking their medication and have relapses as was the case before.

Direct contact between the police forces

The police in Amsterdam also cooperates with the police in Suriname. They have exported a computer system, organised workshops and even built a police station, but most important, they have created direct contact between the police forces. This contact makes many things easier. The cooperation has resulted in several cases of drug smuggling being solved. Furthermore, it has become easier to collect information from Suriname in cases where Suriname citizens have been arrested. Previously, this was impossible or it took three months. Now, it is done in an hour.

Read more about the City of Amsterdam

www.iamsterdam.com

Municipality of Jyväskylä – Finns explore the world

The Municipality of Jyväskylä is very internationally oriented. There is focus on participation in networks for exchange of experience and best practice. In the networks, employees in Jyväskylä become more competent. In addition, the municipality has an expatriation programme that allows posting of five employees in a municipality abroad. The employees gain experiences for life and bring valuable knowledge home.

Jyväskylä is located 270 kilometres north of Helsinki, and with its 126,000 inhabitants it is the ninth biggest town in Finland. It is a classic university town. It has 40,000 students attending youth educations or the university. It also has many high technology companies and research centres. Education is an important element in the municipality of Jyväskylä, but the municipality is also responsible for urban planning, the environment, social services and health, transport and culture.

International work and the employees

For Jyväskylä, a targeted international effort is very important to ensure a positive development of the city and of the employees in the municipality. The work mainly takes place in international networks. The networks are a fertile forum where ideas and knowledge are cultivated and flourish and also an important means to improve employee skills and thereby making it more attractive to work in the Municipality of Jyväskylä.

Examples of Jyväskylä's international work – networks and exchange

The Municipality of Jyväskylä has ten twin-towns in countries such as China, Hungary and Iceland. In addition, Jyväskylä participates in Eurotowns, which is a network working on the implementation of the Lisbon Strategy, in Mittnorden, which is a network of regions in the Nordic countries, and in the Union of the Baltic Cities. The municipality uses the networks to find partners for international projects and as a forum where experts can exchange experience and best practice.

Jyväskylä's international secretariat – the coordinator

There are many international activities in Jyväskylä. Therefore, the municipality has established an international secretariat. The secretariat has three employees who coordinate the international work. It is also responsible for two steering committees. One attends to tasks regarding international activities in the municipal organisation and the other is responsible for other players in the municipality, e.g. educational organisations and private enterprises. In addition, administration of the international work has been distributed to the individual departments so that each department has a person responsible for international activities.

Internal exchange programme – a Finn in New York

Jyväskylä also has an internal programme that enables the employees in the municipality (both in the administration and in the institutions) to work in a municipality abroad. The programme finances five postings abroad every year as well as three scholarships for e.g. a Master's degree. The programme also finances the costs involved in hiring a temporary employee to replace the employee who has gone abroad.

Applications can be submitted once a year. Last year there were 11 applications. Employees are typically posted abroad for one month. Mainly school teachers, but also other staff groups have made use of the opportunity, e.g. a firefighter was posted in New York for a month. As people are interested in being posted abroad, this particular fire station in Jyväskylä subsequently became very popular as a

potential workplace. The programme stipulates that when they return, the employees should make an account of what they got out of the posting to be published in for example the staff magazine.

A posting abroad where you get the opportunity to use your skills in a foreign country and see other ways of doing things is an experience for life and a source of new knowledge and ideas.

Read more about the municipality of Jyväskylä

www.jyvaskyla.fi/lang