
MENTAL BORDER OBSTACLES

Experiences of Obstacles and Possibilities when Working Across the Border between Finland and Sweden

"Mental border obstacles are created, maintained and reproduced in everyday life, and which – consciously or unconsciously – stop people or businesses from moving between countries or regions. They are always related to previously gained experiences, they are often collective and they are carried forward through the telling of stories about the past and stereotypical images of The Others. Mental border obstacles are therefore shared and something which people learn, and they are acted out."

(Source: <http://www.nordiclabourjournal.org/nyheter/news-2019/article.2019-06-19.6388498235>)

At the Finnish-Swedish border, labor market integration is influenced by both the national attraction and the perception of the borderless Torne River Valley. An intertwining daily life has lowered the threshold for cross-border work, while perceptions and experiences of national differences have increased a sense of distance. The corona crisis has further emphasized the underlying tensions.

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This report was compiled by the ØresundsInstitutet. It summarizes 33 interviews and 273 online questionnaire replies from Finland and Sweden. The work was commissioned by the Interreg Nord-project Working Together (Arbeta tillsammans), funded mainly by the European Regional Development Fund.

(Source: <https://arbetatillsammans.com/>)

Main detected obstacles

1 Long distances and weak social networks discourage employment in another country

- Farther away from the border, social networks are weaker and the neighboring country's labor market is less known
- Employers and job seekers can sometimes find each other through social networks. Therefore, cross-border social contacts are of major importance

2 Overlapping national, regional and local narratives

- The story of the borderless Nordic community is strong, but contradictory national stereotypes and narratives of The Others also exist. During the corona pandemic, the conception of nationality has become prominent

3 Participatory or hierarchical work culture

- Although there are many similarities between the countries, a more common perception seems to be that work culture is more hierarchical in Finland whilst more participatory in Sweden. Also, pace of work is perceived to be calmer in Sweden

4 Awareness of the reference framework of one's home country is reinforced by national gravitational pull

- National gravitational pull creates a common frame of reference within countries due to, for example, education, news coverage, culture and, in particular, emphasis on national legislation. A neighboring country is seldom covered to the same extent

5 Languages as mental obstacles

- Lack of language skills is a real obstacle to taking a job in the neighboring country. Attitudes towards language competence vary to some extent between the two countries, and Finland seems to require a higher proficiency in native languages
- Throughout the times, language areas and boundaries have influenced where a particular language is spoken - or not spoken. A local history loaded with negative emotions and connotations can influence people's desire to learn and speak the neighboring language

6 Perceived high threshold

- Even the slightest notion of inconvenience can make one prefer to stay at home. For example, uncertainty about language, negative perceptions of the work culture, lack of knowledge about the labor market, and lack of social contacts across the border. In addition, the notion of high bureaucracy, uncertainty of rules, and concerns about border obstacles for those who want to work across the border can be daunting

Recommendations

Facilitate job seeking and labor employment across the borders

- Spreading more information about cross-border work opportunities
- Interlinking job search websites in Finland and Sweden
- Publishing job advertisements in English
- Telling about work opportunities in the neighboring country in local newspapers
- Organizing more local recruitment fairs
- Marketing also the local community when recruiting new people
- Improving skills in neighboring languages and making them attractive

Increase cross-border co-operation

- Arranging regularly for the authorities to meet each other locally would reduce practical problems
- Harmonizing the validation of vocational qualifications would attract and make it easier for jobseekers to find work across the borders
- Finland and Sweden should agree on a joint crisis strategy in order to avoid the problems that arose on the border during the corona pandemic
- Addressing and removing specific border obstacles
- Highlighting the work that Utbildning Nord has done in providing cross-border vocational education as best practice example (source: <https://utbnord.se/en>)

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