The role of action research in development of Intra- and Inter-organisational cooperation projects – a reflection of experience from two parallel cases.

By

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Making the "Practical Turn" Practical: Collaboration across nationalities, professions and varieties of action research

Sub-theme: The contributions from action research to knowledge based innovation and change. “The work done by action research in aiding and researching practical development processes in organizations, within professions, in communities and regions, needs to be recognized, not only by mainstream research, but also by policy makers and funding institutions. The conference intends to identify and document action research contributions that have created significant change in intra-organizational and inter-organizational development, including networks, clusters, coalitions, industrial districts, regions or social movements.”

Keywords: action research, skills, learning, work life, power, regional development, change, innovation, networks

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Abstract

In this paper two researchers have reflected on their experience from action research projects that has been of both intra-organisational nature, and of inter-organisational nature. They have also reflected on a personal and general level on how to be a good action researcher. They have experienced through these reflections that there are many similarities in their reflections and they have recognized that being an action researcher is a very challenging endeavour in a complex landscape.

They conclude that the institutional framework, together with personal features as knowledge (both theoretical and practical), social skills, and human values are critical factors in promoting good action research. They also argue that doing good action research is not a task you can do solely – because no person will be able to possess all the personal features they have described. From this it is their conclusion that, in order to be able of doing good action research, this must be based on functional teams.
Introduction

This paper is a result of an ongoing and growing cooperation between two regional research institutions in Østfold county in Norway, (Østfold Research Foundation and the University College of Østfold). This collaboration has been made possible through the regional project called Value Creation 2010, and is now also continued through the regional VRI programme (Verdiskaping gjennom Regional Innovasjon/"Value creation through regional innovation"). This paper can also be seen as a continuation of the jointly constructed paper presented at the 5th National Action Research Conference in Aalborg, Denmark in 2006 (Langvik et al, 2006).

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This paper present knowledge gained from two parallel cases. One case is from intra-enterprise projects within the VC2010 Østfold module, and one is from an inter-enterprise (and cross-border) project called BAGN (BAGN, Bærekraftig Arbeidsliv Gjennom Nettverk / “Sustainable worklife through networks”).

The first case is an ongoing action research project called Value Creation 2010 (VS2010) in Østfold. The VS2010 project covers a network of ten nutrient companies and two packaging companies in a county in Norway. The aim of the research project is to build a strong and sustainable partnership between employees, management, Trade Unions, employer’s federation and regional authorities.

This collaboration is stimulated at three levels. Firstly, at the company level through internal innovation projects. Secondly, at the network level between different companies that shares the same type of problems and challenges and wants to collaborate to overcome mutual challenges. Finally, at the regional level where regional authorities together with the targeted companies in joint collaboration is committed to develop new understandings, policies and measures that stimulate to new work arrangements, improve business conditions and the companies’ societal connections. The first case presents results from intra-organizational projects from the ongoing VS2010 Østfold module including a) a packaging and paper mill, b) a bakery and confectionary and c) a juice producing company.

The second case is based on a cooperation project between two regions, Østfold in Norway and Västra-Götaland in Sweden, called BAGN (Bærekraftig Arbeidsliv Gjennom nettverk/"Sustainable worklife through network"). By developing projects, networks and network arenas through inter-organizational cooperation (both from the private and public sector), the aim is to initiate reflection on ongoing practice and sharing of knowledge across the national borders on good personell policies – and by this contributing to a more sustainable worklife.
In these cases both a socio-technical and social learning perspective can be applied to achieve a more inclusive and democratic approach that will contribute to a more sustainable worklife.

**Theory**

In the following we elaborate on a selection of literature that we think are relevant for reflection on critical factors when doing action research in and between organisations in order to promote change processes.

**Organizations as sociotechnical systems**

The system thinking is, according to Graedel and Allenby (1994) and Ehrenfeld (1994), an important basis for industrial ecology. The system thinking in the philosophy goes back to Aristoteles and later Descartes, (Yndestad 1996), with strong viewpoints that a system’s total function and behaviour is a complex effect of functions and behaviour of to the systems’ single parts, to the interplay between these and the interplay with the environment. This is illustrated by Asbjørnsen (1992) in figure 1 below.

According to Bertalanaffy (1998) a system is a structured collection of components and subsystems that mutually influence each other in interplay. Organizations are open systems that interplay with the environment, and that adjust to changes in the environment. This implies that employees (and employers) must recognize that they work inside such an open system perspective. Innovation, and the ability to adapt and change according to changes in the environment is believed to be of major importance for organisations in order to be competitive. According to Bertalanaffy (1998) innovation happens in the interface between inner and outer subsystems through social interactions. Social individuals participate with different explicit and implicit knowledge, age, gender and cultural background. The system thinking is functional oriented. This means that that the system thinking can be used without changes on economical systems, organizations, human systems, as well as technical systems of any kind. This is the strength of the system thinking.

![Figure 1: An illustration of a system (Asbjørnsen, 1992)](image)

To assure that functional, operational, and physical needs and demands are satisfied in the process of integrated projects during the lifespan of the system, it is according to Bertalanaffy (1988) important to develop common conceptions, meanings and approaches in different
disciplines. This is valid within a single section of a firm, in the interface towards other departments in the organization and towards the organizations external environment.

Modern system technique is a collective conception for methods, concepts and techniques that are used to decompose a system where there are strong interactions between different aspects, or parts, which together constitute complex systems. As a part of a more and more complex environment, today’s and future challenges should be met by introducing system thinking in accordance to modern system techniques, including the sociotechnical system approach, (Kirkebak 2000).

In a sociotechnical perspective the aim is to try to understand the problems in an organization based on the relation between the technical- and the social sub-systems, Trist and Bamforth (1951), where the organization is regarded as a system. The social sub-system consist of human resources and the relation between them. According to Levin, Fossen & Gjersvik (1994) this is first of all relations that are related to the individuals need and wishes regarding working conditions, and then secondly towards security, status, power and social networks.

According to Susman (1983) the sociotechnical system is a search for the best possible solutions with often contra dictionary demands from the technological and the social sub-systems. To obtain an optimal total system, one has to compromise between a need for “perfect” technology and a good social system. Levin, Fossen and Gjersvik, (1994) has defined technology as :

- Knowledge about production of objects and services
- Machines and tools to such production
- Techniques (routines and methods) used in object or service production

According to Elden et al (1986), “…a sociotechnical system apply that the humans are looked upon as social individuals, with necessary and important relations to his/hers workmates, subordinates and leaders. He, or she, has the ability to think independently and to do manual tasks. At the same time this individual has the ability to develop by learning from new experiences. The technology must be designed in such a way that it appear useful when used.”

The approach has more relevance today than ever before, as organizational personnel seek more fruitful means of empowerment and as their organizations strive for greater productivity and viability in increasingly turbulent environments.

Researchers from the Tavistock institute in London, did practical research on the Norwegian Democracy projects (in the 1960’s) with he use of sociotechnical models (Elden, 1979 & Thorsrud 1970). The results from this study have had important significance on later organisation of worklife in Scandinavia. One result from this project was the knowledge that the participatory approaches was important in order to increase the industrial democracy. This approach was a design criterion for all organizational work. New ideologies in management were developed with focus on good social relations, Vanebo & Bush (1988). This concept is valid even today. According to Levin (2002), the sociotechnical thinking is building bridges between the technology and the organization. Technological innovation will always promote changes in an organization, also when this was not the main purpose. According to this perspective, an active use of technological innovation projects can be initiated in order to promote planned changes in an organization – in order to create a more homogenous organization.
**Development of new knowledge through action research**

According to Ann Martin (Martin, 2001) action research can be used to model large-group processes that have the aim for creating learning and social change. It is especially important to have in mind the differences between processes that are used for political/cultural purposes and those who aim to generate learning and social change. According to Martin multi-stakeholder processes should be designed to be consistent with the values and goals of action research. To utilize, or to make use of the potential knowledge, often hidden as tacit knowledge – but very much present, hold by the participants in projects and networks - it is possible to design (both small and large events) as a form of action research that exposes collective knowledge and assumptions and uses these to generate the knowledge and power that lead to change (Martin, 2001). It is also important that if group-processes are to be qualified as action research, learning and the generation of new knowledge should be conscious, if not explicit. According to Martin there are some conditions that are necessary for large-group processes to succeed as action research. These can be seen in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conceptualization</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>Clarify purpose – researcher as critical educator.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Define the problem or question – researcher and participants together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Understand whose voices will be heard – and for whose action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing the event</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Establish learning as explicit objective</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Clarify responsibility for action – participants and researcher</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Decide who comes (the participants in the research)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of event</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Establish ground rules for dialogue</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Design for multiple perspectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Prepare for power imbalance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuation of reflection and action (follow-up)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Continue reflection on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Offer social science tools to empower</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ensure system support</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Shift responsibility for research to participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Conditions for large-group designs as action research (Martin, 2001)**

This model has comparable features to the co-generative action research model described by Greenwood and Levin (2007), but seems to be more focused on the initial processes and the development of arenas for communicative actions and problem definitions. However it is evident that constructing these arenas must imply democratic perspectives and a kind of empowerment for the stakeholders. In other words; when action researchers are dealing with social processes we must have in mind the redistribution of power. This is also supported by McNiff (2000, p. 206) saying that “…if action research is to be taken seriously as living out the values of social justice and democracy, then all participants need to be seen as experts who are knowledgeable about their own life world and needs…”, and “all participants in all organizations…”. Furthermore she says; “The question arises who is prepared to be regarded as participants and who decides whose story should be heard” and accordingly; “In issues to do with identity and worth, power and politics are always present.”
Greenwood & Levin (2007), argue that the research should build on “fundamental respect for and trust in human capacities.”, and should emphasize “democratic values and processes by co-creating knowledge applicable by the local stakeholders in their efforts to increase control over their own situations.” According to Greenwood and Levin an action researcher aim should also be to reopen the possibilities for change, enhance a sense of responsibility for the direction of the future, and emphasize that human agency, not impartial control systems, is the centrepiece of social change.

As can be seen from the example of Martin, and her description of how action research can be used to model large-group processes, it is a matter of constructing arenas and construction of rules for people in order to interact and learn from each other. When doing action research projects it is a matter of working with people, and because of this - there is an intrinsic potential of conflicts. Conflicts can be destructive for the ongoing processes in a project, and understanding how these conflicts can be managed should then be a fundamental skill that the action research need to evolve. According to Greenwood & Levin (2007) power relations, the role of ideology, and the direction of history should be a part of all action research projects and must be on any research agenda as problematic phenomena to be dealt with.

The trick is that you can not learn these process skills only by reading – you must learn these skills by experience. According to the perspectives on reflective practice, developed by Donald Schön (1983, 1987, 1991), professional competence are developed through training by a linkage between reflection and praxis. One effective way of doing this is to develop a mentor relationship between an experience action researcher and a not so experience action researcher. This skill has to evolve over a period of time. It can be seen as a process where the novice develops to an expert, as described by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986). According to Greenwood & Levin (2007) skills are a fundamentally necessary component of action research, and should emerge through intelligent actions, not merely from abstract and passive intellectualization. “Learning from one’s own experience is a core element in the development of AR practitioner skills, and there is no substitute for it.”

Learning is a social process resulting from cooperation between involved actors. The results from learning processes can be seen as changes in a product, changes in the process of production, or both. Learning involves making decisions that are influenced by power. The development of new knowledge and power are interdependently connected. Power influence what kind of knowledge is to be developed, and who should have access to it.

Mechanisms of knowledge, such as information, informal networks, knowledge development, socialisation and the development of political ideology in an organization, are important parameters in order to understand how knowledge development, power and culture are heavily integrated.

According to Mc Niff (2000) power is not a “thing” that can be acquired, developed or devolved, as much as the traditional organisation research literature suggests. Power exists in who people are and what they do in relation to with one another.

According to McNiff power can be understood in terms of two traditions:
- Behaviourist traditions (i.e. Lukes, “Three faces of power”). According to the behaviourist, power is an objective force, a thing that people have and use.
  - First face of power (“power over”, i.e. Weber works),
• Second face of power (Bachrach, Baratz) (power within social context “power to”)
• Third face of power (Luke’s critical response to the two first faces), “no-decision”, power does not necessarily stem from decisions, but from patterns of social relationships (“Systemic power”). Socially structured and culturally patterned behaviours of groups, and practices of institutions.

- The tradition saying that power is not a “thing” but a feature of relationships between people (i.e. Foucault’s perspective on presupposition less). According to McNiff (2000), Foucault rejects the idea of power as an object. Power does not exist in the agencies or structures. Power is in the relationships among people as they try to understand who they are (their identities), and as they construct their identities with others. Power is not an object to be used in the construction of identity; power is identity.

According to McNiff people do not encounter power as such, they encounter practices which are discursively and politically enacted. “They live in and through these practices, and people become the identities whose identities are being formed.”

**Complexity of change**

The task of being an action researcher in projects, both in intra-organizational projects and inter-organizational projects, is sometimes tremendous and complex. Why? As an action researcher you are in the middle of the actions and you are a part of the political landscape, and the power play, whether you want to or not, and this should be understood and reflected on.

The product of change and complexity is uncertainty (Hatch, 2001, p. 106) – but it is not the environments that are uncertain – it is the people that feel uncertain. The uncertainty is not a part of the environment but is within the people who consider the environment when making decisions in an organization. According to Antonovsky (1991) it is a larger possibility that a person will do a better job if the person has a sense of belonging. This perspective can be found in the acronym KASAM (KAnsla av SAMmanhang, sense of belonging (Antonovsky, 1991). Consequently, when the sense of belonging KASAM increases, a person will be able to handle changes more flexible.

**Method**

This is a reflection paper, and not a research project, and because of this the methods used for developing the practical knowledge from the two action researchers should not be the focus of attention. One must also be aware of the fact that the results that are obtained in this paper are very much based on subjective data and the validity is very much dependent on the context.

**Participatory observation, interviews and written documentation**

During the projects, participatory observations, interviews and daily blogging were used to collect the empirical material to save the reflection in action. Other written documentation was used as a support during the writing of the cases.

**Chatting and dual interviews**

The writing of the paper was divided between the authors. A chatting channel on the internet (MSN Live Messenger) was used both in the actual writing process and in reflection of experience. The writing process itself was also a help in the reflection process.
An interview guide was made (see appendix 1) as a help during the discussions and dual interviews each lasting for approximately one hour. During the interviews the aim was to focus on factors we believed to be important factors when doing action research projects.

**Results**

**General reflection on being an action researcher**

We bring along our knowledge, and experience, from earlier change processes (small and large) from our private lives and our earlier professional career.

The authors of this paper have a common history in that they have been colleagues in the regional research foundation. During a period of limited economical market for research activities in the region, one of the authors (and three other colleagues from the regional research foundation) started to work at the regional university college. One of the authors continued to work at the regional research foundation.

This situation forced the remaining author to seriously evaluate his situation. The necessary change processes that followed at the regional research institute did have some negative personal consequences, but also some positive. In a situation where the mentors were changing workplace, it was necessary for the remaining (novice) action researcher to develop his skills as an action researcher. He was also a participant in an experimental international PhD program (EDWOR – Enterprise Development and Worklife Research) and at the same time working with a strategic institute program (SIP) with focus on networks and innovation processes. During this challenging time of readjustment he was also the employee representative. If one does not take this environmental context into account, the understanding of these researchers’ reflections on critical factors for doing action research will not be fully understood.

The strategy chosen was to initiate a big project with a role as a project leader and were it was possible to do action research. It was also necessary to develop a project that was relatively large in order to combine the need for focus and to contribute to the economic profitability for the institution.

After a period of 2-3 years, one of the mentors came back and started to work at the regional research foundation again. At the same time there has been an increased cooperation between the regional university college and the regional research foundation, giving rise to new cooperation projects – of which this paper is one result. Despite that the novice action researcher did not yet see himself as an expert in action research (according to Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) – there has been a substantially development in his skills, and also in his awareness of the necessity of teamwork in action research projects.

**Reflection from cases**

**Reflection from a paper and cardboard mill project**

As an example from a project with intra-organizational perspective we use the case project on the corrugated cardboard machine at the cardboard mill located in the Østfold region that started in mid-November 2005. The case project was carried out with researchers from the VRI Østfold module as participants, and was chosen as a prototype project in the mill,
initiating organizational learning from the use of new technology on the cardboard machine, creating a platform for undertaking innovations on network and partnership level.

The first aim of this project, which is reported in this chapter, was to increase the machine efficiency by 25 per cent. The data used as a basis for this chapter was collected as memos from two meetings between the foreman, the cardboard machine operators, and the researcher. The aim of the meetings was to establish the project, and to persuade the operators on the machine to accept this efficiency project as their own. In addition, a workshop was arranged for the workers, their foreman and two researchers. The result of this workshop was also documented in a memo. Finally, data was gathered through interviews and observations of employees in the mill.

Project anchoring among the participating actors

First meeting between the external researcher and the management at the mill
Firstly, as a part of the introduction of the project, the researcher explained how much work which could be expected in the project, and secondly what would be the expected results. Challenges and problems were discussed related to a low utilization of the cardboard machine. The scope and structure of the project was defined, regarding the division of roles and the design of the project. The external researcher made the process was made visible to the management. It was decided that the project group, consisting of the foreman and the external researcher, should investigate the premises for increasing the efficiency of the cardboard machine by 25 per cent. A project report should be available within one year, presenting the findings of the project group. The project group should aim for open communication processes in the organization.

An ambitious aim was needed to attract attention to the project within and outside the company. According to the management, the means known by which the efficiency could be increased were mainly technical, and already familiar to them. However, the solutions aimed at increasing the efficiency of the cardboard machine had not been reached so far. At this stage in the meeting, the researcher pointed out that this would not be a quick-fix for the company, emphasising that implementation would take time and both the technology and the organization would have to work together, in a common improvement process, to fulfil the efficiency potential. During the meeting nothing was said about the reasons why a systematic examination of the machine had not been done formerly. Subsequently, different problems and solutions to improve the efficiency of the cardboard machine were discussed.

Second Meeting with the employees at the cardboard machine present
At the second project meeting, the two shifts operating the cardboard machine participated together with the foreman, the union representative, and the external researcher. The aim of this meeting was to ensure employees’ engagement and participation in recognising problems and solutions to problems.

The production manager presented the new project and informed the employees of the aim to increase efficiency of the cardboard machine by around 25 per cent.

The employees were irritated by this, pointing out that they had made suggestions for improvements over a long period, but without being heard. The employees were suspicious about the motives, and at the meeting some expressed that they regarded the researcher as a representative of the top management, with the task of reducing the number of operators on the machine. The atmosphere was tense and the discussion was heated. At this stage, the external researcher made a strong effort to sell in the project to the operators.
After a while the union representative, the foreman and the researcher increased their engagement in the discussion and the atmosphere changed. At the end of the meeting the employees were much more positive to the project. The production manager, the foreman, the union representative and the researcher felt that it was up to them, and in particular the researcher, to establish the necessary trust by the employees working on the cardboard machine to succeed with the project.

The Project Implementation

Collaboration with operators of the cardboard machine
As the project proceeded, collaboration with the operators of the cardboard machine improved, and the necessary trust between the employees and the researcher was established. The employees were giving positive feedback to the researcher based on how they perceived the work challenges related to the cardboard machine, how they received substantial input from the researcher, and how they thought the efficiency on the machine could be improved. The researcher spent much time in the company together with the employees, being present at all shifts. The atmosphere was open and good. At one point, the employees on the evening shift told the researcher: ‘We shall manage this project together.’ Gradually, the focus the staff had on the physical machine changed from purely technical problems to also include organizational challenges as better communication and collaboration between the operators. The communication gradually developed as the atmosphere characterised by a strong trust between the employees and the external researcher gradually improved. Consequently, the investigating researcher’s phone number was handed out to all employees at the cardboard machine. The employees were then able to report to the researcher whenever an interesting situation happened in connection with operating the machine.

Only workers directly involved in the working process were involved in the project work. However, the rest of the organization was continually informed by the project group, even at the board level of the company, so as to avoid any negative reactions from individual actors or actor groups.

Focused Learning by recognizing solutions to increase the efficiency of the Cardboard Machine with 25 per cent.
The project group understood at a very early stage in the project that the successful implementation of the potential solutions to improve the efficiency of the cardboard machine by 25 per cent could only take place through a strong anchoring of solutions among the operators working on the machine. Consequently, before the project results were presented to the management, the operators of the cardboard machine were gathered to approve the potential technical/organizational solutions. This took place in an open discussion in a trustful atmosphere, creating a common understanding of what should be presented to the management. The report to the management included both necessary technical and organizational solutions to achieve the goal of 25 per cent increase in efficiency, measured as increased output.

Shortly afterwards, the operators working at the cardboard machine took part in a workshop. There, the project group presented questions challenging them to prioritise a task list to improve the efficiency of the machine. Surprisingly, only organizational elements were mentioned in the discussions. During the workshop, the production manager turned up, stating that the operators had a free hand to start up the improvement work. His only restrictions were that the cardboard machine had to be kept running.
Project Result obtained one year after project initiation
Independent project evaluations have been made both by the project group and the operators at the cardboard machine. Both reports stated that the efficiency of the machine had increased approximately 20 per cent. Only one of the technical items, presented one year earlier as an important condition to succeed, had been implemented during the year. Most of the solutions have been of organizational character, where a cooperative atmosphere and co-generative learning processes had been created. Central actors in the cardboard mill believe that the initial goal of 25 per cent in efficiency will be reached through further improvements in the working organization on the machine.

Reflections from BAGN (Bærekraftig Arbeidsliv Gjennom Nettverk / “Sustainable worklife through network”)
As an example of action research done in a project with intra-organizational perspective we use the case project called BAGN (Bærekraftig Arbeidsliv Gjennom Nettverk / Sustainable Worklife Through Network). This project was a result from parallel initiatives in the cross national border region of Østfold (Norway) and Västra-Götaland (Sweden). The project originated from a jointly interest and curiosity towards the challenges in worklife related to increasing numbers of sick-leave and a growing limitation of available workforce due to demographic changes in society. The actors recognised the existent difference in approaches between the two countries on how they dealt with these challenges. Norway seemed to have a greater experience on dealing with these issues through the IW-agreement (Norwegian Tripartite Agreement on a More Inclusive Workplace (IW-agreement). Something that Sweden did not have so much experience on. However, Sweden seemed to have a longer history and experience regarding the use of employer-networks as a tool/instrument for dealing with these issues. By doing a jointly project, financially supported by Interreg IIIA, the idea was to increase our knowledge on how to use network as a tool/instrument in order to keep the available workforce as long as possible in worklife. The differences between the countries were seen as an asset, were the knowledge should be developed through arrangement of seminars/workshops/conferences, participation in the development of network(s), and through the development of new projects in the region, see also Figure 1.

Figure 1: Knowledge foundation in BAGN project
Project anchoring

In this paper it is important to make clear that the case description is written from the perspective of the researcher working at a regional research institute in Østfold (Norway). The case description would most probably have been written differently – if written by other actors in the project. The starting point for working with these issues was through the cooperation between the researcher and the general manager of a workforce recruitment company with special focus on seniors as a resource in worklife. The researcher had towards this point worked on several networking projects (were the aim mainly was to develop different branches in the Østfold region through network by cooperation and innovation (new products and marketing strategies). The researcher was by the general manager made aware of the growing challenge because of demographic changes – and the need for doing something proactively about this now. A small project, named “With life at stake...” was then developed (with financial support from the Østfold County and the Worklife Centre in Østfold). The aim was to investigate the awareness of these challenges in the region and to identify key stakeholders. Through this project we soon realised that this was not a challenge for this Østfold region alone, nor the nation, but for the whole western world. To be able to make a major contribution on this issue – we realised that we had to develop a project that was large, and based on cooperation with international actors. The Østfold county is situated along the national borderline towards Västra-Götaland region in Sweden, and the Interreg programme (www.interreg-sverige-norge.com) was then put forward as a natural and possible financial source.

Because the researcher and the initiators in Norway had little or no experience of Interreg projects contact were made towards the Interreg secretariat – and valuable information on how to – and with whom to – initiate Interreg project were given. We were later invited to Sweden to participate at a seminar were an initiative on developing an employer network (in Vänersborg/Uddevalla region) should be discussed. At this seminar we put forward the proposition to start a cooperation project and to make a jointly application for Interreg funding. After this we started to meet regularly and a project (BAGN) were developed. The researcher from Østfold Research Foundation were chosen as project leader. As an instrument for creating common reflection on the project development and as instrument for anchoring the project further, a paper were produced and presented at a conference in Uddevalla (Langvik et al., 2005). The project was granted funding from Interreg IIIA by October 2005. We had a kick-off in November 2005, and the project ended in June 2007.

Project implementation

The project was organized through a ”working group” with participants from Municipality of Uddevalla, Østfold Research Foundation, NAV Worklife Centre of Østfold, Municipality of Sarpsborg, Hälsobolaget AB (a private company delivering health services, and coordinator for an employer network in Uddevalla region) and BIKAS (a private company working with seniors and entrepreneurship). This ”working group” had 2 functions: 1) Plan and run seminars, 2) Contribute with knowledge from projects they were in charge of, and 3) participate in development of new projects. The role of the researcher was here to be a project leader and at the same time be a researcher. There was also an initiative and willingness to cooperate with researchers from the Fyrbodal institute in Uddevalla but this cooperation was later halted because of financial – and not enough time to do all the research originally planned for in the project. As a point of departure the researcher was trying to use participative action research as an approach in the teambuilding processes (“the working group”) – and the same approach was also chosen as an approach in the arrangement of seminars and project development (Levin & Greenwood, 1998).
Development of a “working group”
As a first effort to increase the sense of a team – the development process of the project was described and reflected upon when writing the paper for the Uddevalla conference in 2005. E-mail were here used, but we did also use a project-web were all the documents were saved. When planning for a seminar we had some discussions around a suggested agenda that were put forward by the project leader. This discussion and reflection was done both electronically and during “working group” meetings. We did also have input from the ongoing projects in the “working group” from ongoing projects by the participants. The projects were as follows: “Job-rotation among teachers in the municipality of Sarpsborg”, “Development of an entrepreneurship centre”, and “Employer network in Uddevalla”/”Competence forum Employer network”. In the working group it was then possible to discuss and to compare different experience from the projects. It was a high level of learning and mutual input on the projects development.

Arrangements of seminars
At the beginning of the project we thought that the principles of “Search-conferences” could be used when arranging the seminars. But we soon realised that we did not have enough experience or resources for running such big events. We then used a more “traditional” way of arranging the seminars – with status information on the project, guest speakers, and a plenum discussion at the end of the seminars. We did however arrange one of the seminars at the facilities of a factory in the region – and it seemed that this was an effective way of increase the engagement of the participants. Maybe because it was more “practical” and not so “theoretic”. In another event we also combined the “traditional” way with the principles of “World-café” as an approach. It seemed to be an effective instrument for increasing the level of reflections. Because we were two persons running this event we were also more successful in managing the process, and to make a systematically better final conclusion of the event.

Projects development
The BAGN project was from the beginning, and through the project period, coloured by uncertainty regarding both co-financing and available human resources. This was mainly because of changes in the participatory organizations and projects. For instance one of the participatory projects had to close down – and project leaders from these projects had to leave the BAGN projects. These created uncertainty, but also a lack of knowledge transfer, and a need for building new personal relations. Another uncertainty – and a parameter that must be taking into account - was stringent financial situation for the home organization of the researcher/project leader. The BAGN project leader had a role as an employee representative and was for a period partly unemployed. All of this, made it necessary to work much more on trying to solve the financial situation, by applying for financial support from other financial bodies. The focus in BAGN projects suffered from this in many ways.
Conclusion

In this paper we have reflected on our experience from action research projects that has been of both intra-organisational nature, and of inter-organisational nature. We have also reflected on a personal and general level on being an action researcher. We have experienced through these reflections that there are many similarities in our reflections and we have recognize that being an action researcher is a very challenging endeavour in a complex landscape (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2: Critical factors promoting good action research](image)

As can be seen from the Figure 2, there are some critical factors on promoting good action research that we would like to conclude with.

We believe that there is some knowledge (both theoretical and practical) that must be in place. First of all you must have some substantial knowledge on the type of problems that are to be dealt with. In a sociotechnical perspective it is an advantage to possess some knowledge and skills in handling the technology dimension. It is also of importance that you have knowledge on handling ongoing group processes, and to change strategy, according to the needs. You must be able to communicate with both managers and employees. Furthermore you should have knowledge on how to run projects (i.e. administrative routines), and as a researcher you must be skilful in research methodologies and knowing why you use them. It is often difficult to be both the process facilitator and the one who do the research documentation. Developing good practices in documentation (minutes, reflection notes etc.) together with other colleagues is therefore a good solution. It is also a good routine to discuss the events as soon as possible afterwards (i.e. in the car, at the office…).

According to Greenwood & Levin (2007) an action researcher should be a ”friendly outsider” with process skills that are characterised by self-confidence, integrity, risk-taking, irony,
security and patience. As an action researcher it is also important to have social skills, to be a good planner, and to adjust to changes (spontaneity).

We will also argue that there are some social skills that are most important. A good action researcher must be humble, act respectfully and showing empathy in his/hers work towards the stakeholders and towards his/hers colleagues.

The action researcher should also act according to the good human values that he/she has developed through a life time experience – and not be afraid of showing it. This will only be a positive thing and will contribute to level out power imbalance by showing the stakeholders that you are nothing else than a human being – as they are – capable of showing feelings and at the same time being a professional researcher.

We believe that power is present everywhere – between people and their relations (as earlier described with reference to McNiff, 2000). Action researchers will act as agents of change, and will therefore often be in the centre of the events, and the power play. No person will experience these situations without being affected personally in some way. To be able to do good action research there must be present an institutional framework that will increase the sense of personal security and self-confidence for the action researcher. Working in an institutional framework with sound economy, good personell policies, and caring colleagues is fundamental. Developing a common ground for reflection (i.e. by experience the same substantial situations, reading the same literature) is also a part of this institutional framework.

We do not see ourselves as experts. We are not perfect – we will never be. We will argue that doing good action research is not a task you do solely – because no person will be able to possess all the features we have described. From this it is our conclusion that, in order to be able of doing good action research, this must be based on functional teams.

We hope that our reflections will contribute to an increased knowledge and insight for everyone in what action research is, or can be. We also hope that this paper will encourage other action researchers to start working together in order to increase the quality and more use of action research in initiatives important for regional development.
References


Appendix 1 – interview guide
(in Norwegian only)