

## Special Issue Editorial

### New Perspectives on Workplace Interventions

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# Special Issue Editorial: New Perspectives on Workplace Interventions

EDITORIAL

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the current special issue is to promote and foster development, debate, and knowledge of workplace Interventions. It is fitting that SJWOP, being a Scandinavian journal, has taken on the task of foregrounding intervention research. Scandinavian work and organizational psychologists have since the late 1990's been at the forefront of the development of research into organizational interventions, for example by promoting a focus on not only effect, but also on process evaluation. This tradition has been kept alive by new generations of Scandinavian researcher who share the ideals of increasing our knowledge about the working mechanisms of interventions.

But organizational interventions have proven to be much broader than just participatory interventions, and the current special issue contains a range of intervention approaches and methodological approaches.

The papers in the special issue each present different areas and approaches in advancing our knowledge about interventions. We are pleased to publish both conceptual papers on evaluation and new forms of intervention as well as evaluations of interventions expanding our methodological toolbox.

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The aim of the current special issue is to promote research, knowledge, and debate within the field of organizational interventions. We are delighted that our call has led to an array of papers employing a variety of approaches to the topic and hope the readership will both enjoy and learn from the papers that have been accepted in this special issue.

We want to emphasize the importance of this, the first special issue in SJWOP, having a focus on solutions rather than problems—as in focusing on the potential for interventions rather than focusing on studies linking poor working conditions with poor well-being. Even though both aspects of work and organizational psychology are important, the literature has countless times asked for more intervention studies of how a particular problem can be addressed (for instance, [De Witte et al., 2015](#)) and for more in-depth study of intervention mechanisms and processes ([Kompier & Aust, 2016](#); [Nielsen, 2013](#)).

We see it as an important duty of SJWOP, being a Scandinavian journal, to take on the task of foregrounding intervention research.

Scandinavian work and organizational psychologists have been leading the development of research within the field of organizational interventions, with a special emphasis on participation and process evaluation ([Mikkelsen et al., 2000](#); [Nielsen et al., 2006](#); [Saksvik et al., 2002](#)). This tradition has been kept alive by new generations of Scandinavian researchers who share the ideals of increasing our knowledge about the working mechanisms of interventions ([Abildgaard & Nielsen, 2018](#); [Helland, Christensen, Innstrand, Iversen, et al., 2021](#); [Helland, Christensen, Innstrand, & Nielsen, 2021](#); [Tafvelin, Nielsen, et al., 2019](#); [Tafvelin, Schwarz, et al., 2019](#); [von Thiele Schwarz et al., 2021](#)).

The Scandinavian countries have been in the forefront in the development of knowledge and research regarding the psychosocial work environment ([Christensen, Saksvik & Karanika-Murray, 2017](#)). Their approach has throughout the years challenged Taylorism and has investigated other lines to organizing and managing work ([Karasek & Theorell, 1990](#); [Thorsrud & Emery, 1966](#)). The Nordic model as an approach to organization of work became recognized in the 1930s with the aim of creating a collaboration between the parties in work life: the employers, the unions, and the government, thereby reducing conflicts ([Gustavsen, 2011](#); [Hasle & Sørensen, 2013](#); [Bévort & Einarsdottir, 2021](#)). As a result of reduction in conflict level, an increase in productivity was expected ([Gustavsen, 2011](#)).

A key aspect of the functioning of the Nordic model is the tripartite cooperation between local and national authorities, employer organizations, and trade unions, where the aim is to make sure the voices from different stakeholders are heard; this includes the psychosocial factors of autonomy, variety, and participation as pillars

for how to collaborate. In the Scandinavian countries, the different stakeholders within organizations have been socialized into shared mental models of these values and attitudes towards collaboration between the parties in work life and focus on occupational health. There are great benefits to show from this model, including the fact that Nordic countries are in the lead in international comparisons related to economy, health, and well-being ([Gustavsen, 2011](#)). Research also shows that autonomy, social support, participation, and skills enhancement are important factors for productivity, health, and well-being ([Nielsen & Christensen, 2021](#)). One core question is how the Nordic model and approach would work outside the Nordic countries and context. Some examples that are built on the collaboration within the parties in work life are the dialogue between the different stakeholders, social innovation, and participation and democracy within the organizations. As shown, for example, in the H-work project ([De Angelis et al., 2020](#)), it is feasible for organizations outside the Scandinavian countries to apply principles of participation and multiple stakeholders in decision making in organizational interventions and organizational development.

There can be many benefits of a participatory intervention process ([Nielsen, 2013](#); [Nielsen & Christensen, 2021](#)). A participatory process enables employees to take ownership and understand the vision behind the interventions and further use the experience and knowledge of the employees to create change. It makes it easier for the employees to understand the reasoning behind the change and finally create a fit between the employees needs and the actual intervention through a dialogue between the different stakeholders ([Nielsen & Christensen, 2021](#)). Studies have therefore underlined the importance of participation in organizational interventions ([Christensen et al., 2020](#); [Nielsen, 2013](#); [Nielsen & Randall, 2012](#); [Tafvelin, Schwarz, et al., 2019](#)), both as a means and as a research topic in itself ([Abildgaard et al., 2018](#); [Olsen et al., 2020](#); [Wählin-Jacobsen, 2019](#)). Earlier literature on participation shows that this very Scandinavian quality is indeed a key component in interventions, again underscoring the link between participatory intervention research and Scandinavian traditions. But organizational interventions have proven to be much broader than just participatory interventions, and the current special issue contains a range of intervention approaches and methodological approaches.

The papers in the special issue each present different areas and approaches in advancing our knowledge about interventions. We are pleased to publish both conceptual papers on evaluation and new forms of intervention, as well as evaluations of interventions expanding our methodological toolbox.

## NEW FORMS OF WORK – NEW FORMS OF INTERVENTION

A further motivation for the continuing interest in developing intervention research is that a changing working life forces us to develop novel organizational interventions to address new challenges. This also entails developing new ways to deliver interventions and focus on new arenas for organizational interventions. One key example of this is the ongoing digitalization of work. New technology is constantly being developed, which influences our society (Zuboff, 2019) but also our working life (Orlikowski, 2007). Additionally, new technologies also provide new possibilities for interventions. Not long ago, most quantitative intervention data collection was done by paper-based questionnaires, and interventions were done by consultants meeting physically with participants. Today the possibilities are constantly increasing to use apps both to support intervention data collection and as a method of intervention itself (Karlsen et al., 2022). These developments lead us to argue for intervention research needing to focus on technological developments, and the possibilities and challenges they pose. Several papers in the special issue are taking part in the digitalization of intervention research; the Kosenkranius et al. (2023) paper uses an app-based intervention format, and the Tafvelin et al. (2023) paper uses an email-based booster activity.

The challenge of harnessing new forms of work, and new working conditions, in interventions is also the key topic in the Bauer and Jenny (2023) paper. Bauer and Jenny (2023) discuss how digital interventions and design theory are linked and form potential venues in which new intervention methods can be developed and refined.

## USING INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TO BOOST INTERVENTION EFFECTS

Digital tools may also be included as part of an intervention to boost its effects. The Tafvelin et al. (2023) paper is an example of organizational psychology interventions not only focusing on well-being and work environment, but also going into related fields—in this case leadership training. As our field of organizational psychology intervention research has amassed substantial knowledge about how to best implement initiatives in workplaces, it is highly relevant to employ intervention research methodology to, for instance, leadership training. A particularly interesting aspect of the Tafvelin et al. (2023) paper is that it compares different booster activities, in that sense moving beyond a simple intervention versus control design, instead examining variants of an intervention to arrive at the most effective setup. The findings point towards the usefulness of an e-mail booster as a cost-effective

alternative to telephone coaching to reinforce lessons learned in leadership training.

## HOW DO WE ADDRESS COMPLEX RESULTS?

Though research on organizational intervention is increasing, there is still a call for a deeper understanding and testing of our methods to acquire knowledge on what works, for whom, under which conditions, and why (Abildgaard et al., 2020; Nielsen & Randall, 2015; von Thiele Schwarz et al., 2021). A development in workplace intervention research in recent years is to use increasingly sophisticated methodologies and evaluation models to support and guide evaluation and analysis of intervention processes and outcomes. The solution has been a constant focus to develop more refined knowledge and methods to direct the process of design, implementation, and evaluation of organizational interventions (Abildgaard, 2018; Abildgaard et al., 2016; von Thiele Schwarz et al., 2021).

One line of research that has risen into a prominent position and has been used extensively is the realist evaluation paradigm (Pawson, 2013; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). This has provided new perspectives on how to work with concepts such as ‘context’ and ‘mechanism’ (Abildgaard et al., 2020; Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017), and better shed light on ‘what works, for whom, under which circumstances’ (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017). We are pleased that the special issue also includes a conceptual paper in this line of research.

The Roodbari et al. paper presents an intriguing integrated realist evaluation paper in this line of research, showing how the Context-Mechanism-Outcome (CMO) configuration approach can expand our knowledge of ‘what works, for whom, and under which conditions’ to increase the chances of succeeding with organizational intervention processes.

Hopefully this integrated model can inspire interventionists in the future to develop more comprehensive evaluation strategies.

## COMPLEXITIES OF WORKPLACE AND OUTSIDE WORKPLACE INTERVENTIONS

When interventions are implemented in workplace contexts, the complexity and challenges inherent in changing that context affect the study in question. The challenges of successfully implementing interventions have led to illustrative studies of how workplaces are not passive recipients, but may engage in behaviour that runs counter to the study (Nielsen et al., 2006; Randall et al., 2007). An entire edited volume has even been titled ‘Derailed Organizational Interventions for Stress and


Well-Being' (Karanika-Murray & Biron, 2015). Though it might seem unproductive to wallow in failure, being able to understand why an intervention did not lead to the intended outcomes, and what factors should be taken into account in the future, is a core aspect of research that has helped us develop nuanced recommendations to implement interventions (von Thiele Schwarz et al., 2021). Our current special issue has an example of such a study that, though they fail to find statistically significant effects, is interesting and useful. The Kosenkranius et al (2023) paper looks into an off-job crafting intervention delivered using an app. In the study, the authors do not end their investigation by simply concluding that the intervention failed, but instead look deeper into the mechanisms of participation, and find that challenges of ensuring participation are related to the goals the participants set and whether those goals target the most pertinent needs. This result surely is relevant for others who consider venturing into testing job crafting interventions.

As a final note, we hope the current issue is read by practitioners and researchers, not as a closing of the theme of interventions in SJWOP but instead as an invitation to use us as a venue for further debate and discussion of how we can best implement and evaluate interventions to improve the working conditions of the future.


## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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