

**Voluntary Enrolment -
A Viable Way of Staffing Projects?**

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Abstract

Traditionally allocation of personnel for projects has been seen as a management task. Recently, however, more and more organisations are treading new paths when staffing projects. In this article we examine a new staffing procedure, in which enrolment is dependent on employees voluntarily responding to internal advertising of projects. An important issue in voluntary enrolment is the employee's decision to enrol or not. To investigate the enrolment decision process, we develop a model that we call the 'Enrolment Readiness Model'. The key concept in the model is 'enrolment readiness', which is a concept we develop to depict intention to enrol as the outcome of a decision process triggered by the awareness of a project being advertised. The model is tested in a municipal administration organisation that has staffed projects by voluntary enrolment for a number of years. The case study mainly confirms the proposed model, but also clarifies that voluntary enrolment may cause problems in getting a sufficient number of participants in the proposed projects. The article concludes by stressing that voluntary enrolment seems to require more attention and effort from top management than a traditional/conventional staffing procedure and we propose ways that the Enrolment Readiness Model can be helpful in supporting voluntary enrolment.

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Key words: Staffing, Enrolment, Enrolment Readiness Model, Renewal Projects, Human Resource Management.

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Why Voluntary Enrolment?

A central assumption in the project management literature is that a successful project demands committed and motivated project participants. However, the reality is that not all projects are perceived to be interesting by all project participants and therefore do not arouse as much commitment and motivation as expected from the literature [1]. Staffing projects with committed and motivated participants is especially difficult in renewal projects. Renewal projects typically centre on organisational development and can be observed in many organisations in the private as well as in the public sector. Staffing these projects is complicated because renewal projects are typically characterised by being a unique effort carried out by a temporary team, whose members have to work partly on their everyday work and partly on the project at the same time [2, 3, 16]. Therefore, management has to find relevant project participants among employees who are not necessarily close to management, who are not involved in project work as their primary task, and who will have to find the time for the renewal project in their time schedule, which is often already fully occupied by their primary job. In organisations running renewal projects, an important task is thus to promote the successful accomplishment of the renewal projects by staffing them in a manner that enhances recruitment of motivated employees.

To overcome the problems described above, new staffing procedures have been developed. Among these procedures is voluntary enrolment, in which enrolment is dependent on employees responding to internal advertising of projects. Traditionally, when staffing projects, a manager (the project owner and/or the project manager) estimates the need for resources and competencies and assigns relevant people, perhaps in cooperation with line or function managers [2, 3]. In some organisations management asks the employee whether he/she wants to participate in a given project before final assignment takes place. In other organisations, employees are simply instructed to participate in the project. Staffing projects by voluntary enrolment is thus different from traditional procedures, as the decisions involved in staffing projects are shifted from manage-

ment to employees when it comes to deciding who could be relevant to consider for the project in question.

The main argument in favour of voluntary enrolment is to be found in an assumption stating that a person who is attracted by a renewal project out of personal interest will be more engaged in the project than a person who is appointed to the project, for example because of his/her formal position in the organisation. This is in line with theory of self-determination [5, 6] stating that a person is more likely to take action (e.g. take an active part in a project), when that person feels that his/her behaviour is self-determined rather than controlled and imposed by others [7]. An additional argument for using voluntary enrolment is that employees in many organisations feel that management insists on accomplishing too many projects simultaneously [1, 2, 4]. Voluntary project enrolment reduces this problem by handing over the decision concerning possible involvement in a given project to employees. Finally, a third argument in favour of voluntary enrolment is that voluntary enrolment opens up opportunities for enrolment of relevant employees, whom management would not have thought of by itself and, thereby, the pool of possible participants in each project becomes larger and more relevant.

An argument against staffing by voluntary enrolment is that the selection of project participants is based on motivation and not on competencies possessed by the potential participants. However, some renewal projects are characterised by not demanding specific professional skills but rather knowledge about the organisation and in these projects being enthusiastic is imperative. Furthermore, voluntary enrolment does not prevent that top management in the end decides who enter the final project group. Another weakness is that voluntary enrolment as staffing procedure does not secure that projects are carried out as there may not be a sufficient number of employees enrolling in all projects. This may induce problems in keeping the enrolment truly voluntary if too few employees enrol in the projects advertised as there may be a danger that top management then may urge employees to enrol. This problem may be particularly significant if there are a high number of renewal projects in the organisation.

Need for Better Understanding of Voluntary Enrolment

The above suggests that voluntary enrolment potentially benefits both employer and employee and, therefore, can be a good option for staffing renewal projects. However, if staffing projects this way is to be successful in terms of accomplishing projects, it is important that a sufficient number of employees enrol in the advertised projects.

Unfortunately, extant PM literature does not provide sufficient information about how voluntary enrolment actually performs as a procedure for staffing projects. Therefore, there is a need for better insights into how voluntary enrolment works when applied in an organisation. To establish a better understanding, it is necessary to focus on the process during which an individual decides whether he/she wants to enrol in a given project. Consequently, the aim of this article is to provide a better understanding of the determinants for the employee to voluntarily enrol in an advertised project. In understanding voluntary enrolment, we focus on: the perceptual process that leads an individual to a decision to enrol; whether intention to enrol can predict voluntary enrolment; and finally, we discuss managerial implications of the findings.

The underlying assumptions (1) voluntary enrolment leads to more motivated project participants, and (2) more motivated participants lead to better project performance and project results, can be questioned, but this is not within the scope of this article.

Elaborating on the Concept of Voluntary Enrolment

To better foresee possible problems in voluntary enrolment, there is a need for a more detailed picture of how the employee decides to enrol in a proposed project. The awareness of a project proposal confronts the employee with the problem of deciding whether to enrol or not. This decision can be made on impulse or based on a cognitive decision process [8]. Considering that enrolment in a renewal project has consequences on workload, and that the number of projects is probably not very large, we find it safe to assume that the decision process is

mainly a cognitive one. In line with cognitive decision theory [8] we, therefore, expect that the decision to enrol is the outcome of a cognitive process during which the proposed project is evaluated. In order for top management to be able to support voluntary enrolment, it is important to understand at what stage(s) in this decision process the potential project participants tend to decide to reject the proposal and, consequently, not to enrol.

To elaborate on the perceptual process leading to a positive attitude towards enrolling, we find that Shalit's Sequential Appraisal Model [11] is a useful tool. Shalit calls attention to the fact that each individual translates the objective reality into a subjective reality and rests his/her action on this subjective perception. Different individuals assess the same situation differently depending on their former experiences and their expectations for the future. In order to react to a situation (e.g. an advertised project), it is not enough, Shalit argues, that the individual cognitively assesses that he/she understands the situation, perceives it as relevant, and considers him/herself able to manage it. In addition to this, the individual must feel a need, a drive, and a desire to get involved in the situation. Shalit thus emphasises both the cognitive and the affective aspects of a situation. Furthermore, he introduces the concept "instrumental assessment", which covers the individual's perception of whether he/she is able to influence the situation and is ready at the right point in time.

According to Shalit, every individual goes through three perceptual phases before a decision to act is reached. The phases are presented in table 1.

Every phase contains questions that the individual asks him-/herself. The first step toward reacting to a situation is a cognitive realisation that a situation demanding a reaction exists at all (Question 1). Hereafter, the individual assesses whether the situation concerns him/her personally (Question 2), and so on. To react to a situation, in this case to enrol in an advertised project, the individual must respond positively to all eight perceptual questions and, thereby, proceed through the whole process. A negative response to a question is expected to be followed by a negative response to the subsequent questions because, by defini-

tion, the individual “leaves” the process at the time he/she decides to reply negatively to one of the questions in the sequence.

Table 1. The Sequential Appraisal Model

	Process Phases		
	Appraisal	Mobilization	Realization
Cognitive	1. Is it?	4. Do I understand?	7. What do I do?
Affective	2. Does it concern me?	5. Do I want?	8. Will I commit myself?
Instrumental	3. Can I affect it?	6. Am I ready?	9. Do!

Source: Shalit 1988, p. 28.

It is commonly accepted that the decision to act is not based entirely on the person’s own attitude towards the behaviour. To include this Theory of Reasoned Action [9] provides a helpful frame of reference. According to this theory and other generally acknowledged attitude models [10], intention to act precedes actual action and the attitudes of others play a part in the overall attitude towards action. In the current context this means that intention to enrol precedes actual enrolment and that the opinions of others, “social pressure”, must also be considered. In accordance with the Theory of Reasoned Action [9], we therefore expect the individual’s enrolment readiness to be modified by social norms of immediate superior, peers, and family concerning enrolment in projects.

To capture intention to enrol, we have developed a concept that we call *enrolment readiness*. We define *enrolment readiness* as the individual’s incentive to enrol in a project advertised in the organisation on his or her own initiative. This means that enrolment readiness for potential participants should be high if a given project is to attract a sufficient number of participants in the final project group. Enrolment readiness is thus, as we see it, a necessary stepping stone

toward actual enrolment and it is, therefore, important to understand both the elements of the concept and the process leading to enrolment readiness.

Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior [12] and general theory on perception and attitude formation [10], we anticipate that potential project participants' attitudes towards a given project may be influenced by their own attitudes in general towards project work. Also, there might be influences from personal backgrounds. Finally, based on the same theoretical framework as above, we expect enrolment readiness to be able to predict actual enrolment.

Modelling Enrolment Readiness

Enrolment readiness is defined as the result of a perceptual process containing several phases in which the individual in question makes a cognitive, affective, and instrumental assessment of a given project proposal.

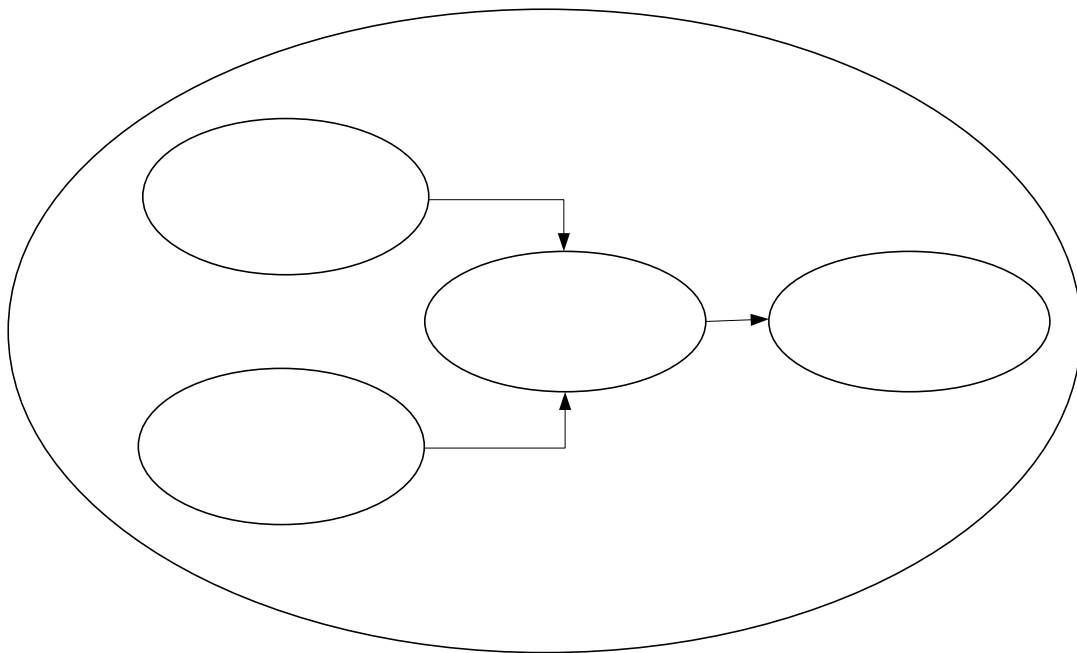
Based on the theoretical frame of reference presented in the section above and in a pre-study [13], we have developed the following hypotheses:

- H1:** The likelihood that an individual enrolls in a project increases with increasing enrolment readiness of the individual.
- H2:** In the process toward enrolment readiness, positive assessment is expected to be highest for the first questions and to fall along the process as more and more individuals leave the process.
- H3:** Enrolment readiness is influenced by social pressure from reference groups and the motivation to comply with these groups.
- H4:** The individual's general attitude towards working on projects may influence enrolment readiness and/or enrolment.

H5: Differences in personal background may also influence enrolment readiness and/or enrolment.

Determinants for enrolment in a given advertised project can thus be visualised as shown in figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Model of Enrolment Readiness



In figure 1, enrolment is preceded by enrolment readiness. Enrolment readiness is determined by the employee's appraisal of the advertised project and by his or her consideration of referents' attitudes towards his/her participation in the project. In addition to this, personal background and general attitude towards project work is expected to influence the process in general. Therefore, these last two factors are not connected to other factors by arrows indicating a clear causal relationship.

The Case

The model was tested in a case study conducted by the authors in 2003 in a municipal administrative organisation in Denmark (Helle Kommune, which is equivalent to a local government or council). The study followed a qualitative pre-study [13] consisting of interviews with several employees and the CEO. In Denmark, municipal organisations are responsible for elementary schools, some health care, minor roads and parks, and social services. Helle Kommune became project-oriented in 1999 when a new CEO was hired and a generational change in the management of the organisation took place. In the old organisation, only very few projects were initiated. In Helle Kommune (with 650 employees) a range of renewal projects have been carried out. Some of the projects are cross-organisational renewal (COR) projects and involve participants from all units of the organisation. A COR project typically concerns the whole municipal organisation, for example, the introduction of a new health policy for all employees or diffusion of the official values of the organisation to all units. Helle Kommune has accomplished 20 COR projects during the last 3½ years. These projects differ considerably in size, in terms of number of participants, duration, and in the effort each participant has to invest.

Since 1999 most of the COR projects have been staffed by internal advertising and voluntary enrolment. The procedure is as follows: Project proposals are presented in reports from weekly board meetings. A number of “project seats/jobs” are advertised in the proposals. The reports are sent by e-mail to all employees. The projects are only described briefly in the reports because the board believes that project participants will be more motivated to work on a project if they are responsible themselves for defining the project in detail. Persons who are interested can sign up for the project by approaching the contact person named in the project proposal. For projects that do not get a sufficient number of people enrolled, the proposals are reformulated, or the projects are postponed or dropped. Since 1999, only one COR project has been dropped because of lack of participants. However, several project proposals have been offered more than once, and for some proposals, employees were encouraged per-

sonally to enrol in order to reach a sufficient number of participants. Prior to start-up of the project, participants in the project group are selected by top management from among the voluntary enrollers. Thus top management acts as a gatekeeper and still makes the final decision about staffing the projects.

According to the CEO, the aim of using this staffing procedure is, as expected from the above mentioned theory, to ensure that project participants are very motivated when assigned and also to ensure that as many employees as possible know about projects taking place in the organisation and give them the opportunity to develop their project work competencies by enrolling. Project participation is not linked to a potential increase in salary, opportunity for advancement or other incentives. The reason is that management wants project participation to carry its own rewards, and, furthermore, it does not want employees with greater possibilities for project participation to have better opportunities for rewards than other employees in the organisation.

To support project competence on the general level, Helle Kommune offered courses in project work in 2000 to all relevant employees (approximately 250). About 125 employees chose to participate.

As the COR projects in Helle Kommune have been renewal projects staffed by voluntary enrolment and there is accumulated experience in this way of staffing projects over some time, we find that COR projects in Helle Kommune are very well suited for testing the validity of the Enrolment Readiness Model.

Measuring the Constructs in the Enrolment Readiness Model

The stated hypotheses were tested using a survey among all managers in Helle Kommune, as especially managers are assumed to be potential participants in the COR projects.

To test hypothesis 1 respondents were asked whether they felt ready to enrol and whether they had actually enrolled in the project in question.

To test hypothesis 2 stating that Shalit’s model [11] describes the employees decision process, it is necessary to transform the general questions in this model to the current context. Table 2 below shows the questions concerning an advertised project, posed to cover the appraisal process as seen by Shalit [11]. The questions were developed on the basis of the qualitative pre-study. Enrolment readiness is the outcome of this process, and is thus measured by level of agreement to the second last item in table 2.

Table 2. Questions Covering the Appraisal Stages

Question in Shalit’s model	Question in present survey
Is it?	I am aware that this project was advertised
Does it concern me?	I thought that the outcome of the project would influence my daily work
Can I Affect it?	I was sure that I would become a participant if I enrolled in the project
Do I Understand 1?	I had a clear picture of the tasks involved in the project
Do I Understand 2?	I was able to foresee the workload in this project
Do I want?	I thought that this project would be interesting for me to participate in
Am I ready 1?	I considered myself professionally prepared to participate in this project
Am I ready 2?	I felt that there was space in my time schedule to participate in this project
How do I do?	I had no doubts about how to enrol
Will I commit myself 1?	I had a good feeling about enrolling
Will I commit myself 2?	I felt ready to enrol
Do	Did you enrol in the project?*

Remark: The scales all ranged from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Certainly) except the question marked * which was a yes/no question.

In order to be able to test the hypothesized ability of enrolment readiness to predict enrolment, respondents were asked whether or not they actually enrolled in each project. The wording of this question is also shown in table 2. The questions were posed for four different projects that were advertised during the past year. The titles of these projects are displayed in table 3. The projects cover different areas and should, therefore, appeal to different individuals.

Table 3. Projects Included in the Study

Project number	Project Title0
1	Ready for E-day 2003
2	Initiating use of Digital Signature
3	Cross Organisational Development of Managers
4	Decentralisation and Simplification in Helle Kommune

To test the influence of social pressure (hypothesis 3), it was necessary to consider whose opinions were expected to be important to the employee. Based on results from the qualitative study [13], we expected these to be people who would be directly affected by the employee assigning his/her efforts to the project in question. We found these groups to be: Immediate superior, peers, and family. In order to measure social pressure, we asked about importance of opinion as well as expected reaction from the above mentioned groups.

From the model in figure 1 and hypothesis 1, we expected the enrolment process to be influenced by the employee's attitude towards project work. To measure this perception, we considered different aspects of opinion. In the qualitative pre-study, we found this to be: The individual's general attitude towards project work; towards COR projects; and towards voluntary enrolment. Also based on results from the qualitative study, we developed a number of questions aimed at measuring the attitude towards these aspects of project work.

Personal background was also expected to influence the enrolment process (hypothesis 5). Again, based on the qualitative study, we expected the influential

factors to be the following: Years of employment in the organisation; proximity to the decision making processes in the organisation; participation in project work courses; and gender.

These questions and the questions, aimed at reflecting the sequential appraisal process, were all posed using multi-item 5-point likert-type scales plus a “don’t know” option. Because of a rather limited number of managers (40) in Helle Kommune, it was not possible to pre-test the scales on a larger number of respondents prior to this study. This implies that measurement scales were developed as a part of the study. This is not ideal but is also not considered to pose a serious threat to the validity of the study [17].

The questionnaire was published on the Internet. This way of collecting survey data produces high response rates and few missing values [14]. Also, the response structure has been found to be the same as for pen-and-pencil data [15]. Respondents were recruited through an e-mail sent directly to each manager and personalised by using their name in the e-mail. This e-mail was supported by an e-mail from the CEO stressing the importance of participation by all managers in the survey.

Results

We received usable responses from 33 out of 40 managers who were asked to participate in the study. The response rate is thus 82.5%, which we consider very satisfying based on generally expected response rates [12]. An investigation of the non-respondents shows that these are mainly managers from the health sector, showing that the response rate for the rest of the organisation is very high and, at the same time, quite poor for this part of the organisation. We have no explanation for this response pattern.

In the following, we present results from the survey concerning the connection between enrolment readiness and actual enrolment in a given project (hypothesis 1); the process leading to enrolment readiness (hypothesis 2); influence of

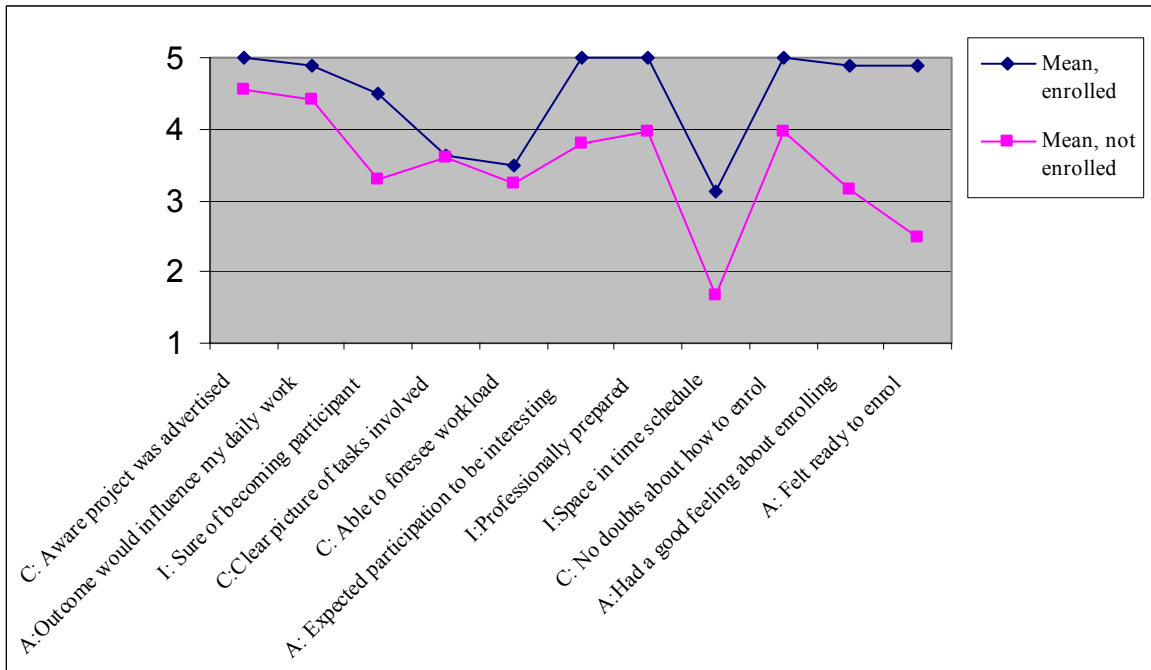
social pressure (hypothesis 3); and along the way, check for influence of prior attitude (hypothesis 4) and personal background (hypothesis 5) on these elements.

Enrolment Readiness as a Predictor of Actual Enrolment

Hypothesis 1 postulates that enrolment readiness is a necessary stepping stone toward voluntary enrolment in projects. The aim of this section is to investigate whether enrolment readiness is a good predictor of actual enrolment. Unfortunately, the number of actual enrollers in the sample is rather limited. In projects 1 and 2, none of the respondents indicated having enrolled in the project, whereas four persons had enrolled in project 3 and one in project 4. In spite of the disappointing number of enrollers, we think that it makes sense to investigate the power of enrolment readiness as a predictor of actual enrolment. To do so, we look further into differences in the process for enrollers and non-enrollers in project 3 as this is the only project with more than one enroller. Mean response values for enrollers and non-enrollers are presented in figure 2.

Figure 2 clearly shows a higher level of enrolment readiness for enrollers than for non-enrollers. This supports the first hypothesis stating that the probability of enrolling increases with a higher level of enrolment readiness. Looking at figure 2, we see that the difference in mean values for enrollers and non-enrollers is quite small at the beginning of the process, except “Sure of becoming a participant”, and does not increase until the question measuring affective appraisal in the mobilisation phase: “Expected participation to be exciting”. Affective appraisal in the mobilisation phase thus seems to be the critical stage in the current project, as the difference in levels remains during the rest of the process, and is even enlarged towards the end of the process. A further investigation into the data using discriminant analysis reveals a significant difference for two variables: “Space in time schedule” and “Felt ready to enrol”.

Figure 2. Mean Values for the Stages in the Appraisal Process, Project 3



Remark: C= Cognitive, A= Affective, I= Instrumental. 1= Not at all, 5= Certainly.

Even though there is a significant difference between enrollers and non-enrollers on the outcome of the sequential appraisal process, this difference is far from being able to explain enrolling or not in total. In order to try to explain this, we added additional variables to the model as stated in hypotheses 4 and 5. The result of this analysis showed that a negative anticipation of the impact on performance in everyday tasks along with a feeling that the advertised projects in general are not relevant have a negative impact on actual enrolment. In contrast to this, participation in courses on project work has a positive impact on actual enrolment.

The Process toward Enrolment Readiness

In the section presenting the theoretical frame of reference, we argued that we define enrolment readiness to be the result of a perceptual process, as described by Shalit [11]. Returning to figure 2, we see that the response pattern shows as

expected from hypothesis 2, that the average level of agreement to the statements falls as the appraisal process proceeds.

Analysis of the data also showed that the outcome of the appraisal process is influenced by some of the elements in the general attitude towards project work, but not by personal background. The influence works as follows: If, in general, a person finds project work too time consuming, it has a negative influence on the outcome of the appraisal process. In contrast to this, expecting that the composition of the group will be better when using voluntary enrolment as opposed to a traditional staffing procedure, has a positive influence on the outcome of the appraisal process. Still, a further investigation into the responses of the individual employees shows that the standard deviation is relatively large for the outcome of the process, even when the additional variables are taken into consideration. This indicates that there are more influential variables than we have been able to reveal in this study and that there are differences among employees concerning which stages of the appraisal process are critical.

Social Pressure

According to hypothesis 3, we expected social pressure to influence the level of enrolment readiness.

Analysis of the data showed that the expected reaction of the immediate superior and peers to voluntary enrolment was generally a positive one and that most employees would not think much about the reaction from these groups when considering whether to enrol or not. However, there were differences regarding reactions from the employee's family. Cross-tabulation showed that the reaction from family was generally not considered if it was expected to be positive. However, if the reaction was expected to be negative, it would be taken into consideration, and further analysis showed that this would have a negative impact on enrolment readiness. Hence, if the potential participant expects his/her family to hold a negative attitude towards him/her participating in an advertised COR project, the individual in question tends to be unlikely to enrol.

Limitations of the Study and Managerial Implications

The current study aims to add to the understanding of the process leading to voluntary enrolment. In order to do so, we developed a model and we tested its validity using a case study in an organisation that uses this method to staff projects. We feel that the study has enhanced our understanding of this process. However, when inferring from this study, it is important to consider some important limitations of the study. The most important limitation of the study is that because the number of respondents actually enrolling in a project was very limited, we had to rely on the study of the appraisal process in one and not four different projects, as we anticipated when planning the study. This means that the conclusions in this article are based on a slender empirical foundation. However, the results are quite clear and, therefore, we feel that it is safe to make some managerial recommendations based on these results, in spite of these reservations.

The results found in the study imply that for voluntary enrolment to be successful in terms of number of persons enrolling in advertised projects, top management has to consider at which stage in the appraisal process employees in their organisation generally decide not to proceed in considering enrolment. In the case of Helle Kommune, it seems that there is a need for an organisation-wide attempt to organise daily activities in a way that creates more time for participating in COR projects. In other organisations, the problems could be at different stages in the appraisal process.

In addition to initiatives on the general level, our findings show that top management has to differentiate its behaviour according to an assessment of enrolment readiness of the individual employee concerning each advertised project. Some employees need guidance on topics relating to the cognitive elements in the appraisal process, whereas others need support on the affective elements, and still others do not need support at all. The study did not show any relationship between background variables (gender, age, employment status etc.) and

enrolment readiness. Therefore, such characteristics of the employee cannot be used as a guideline for who needs support during their appraisal process.

To be able to determine at what stages in the appraisal process there may be problems in the organisation both on the general level and on the level of the individual employee, we suggest that top managers turn to the questions in table 2 and use them as a diagnostic tool. To identify the relevant areas to focus on in the assessment of the enrolment readiness of the individual employee, top management has to draw on its knowledge of the employee in question.

Voluntary enrolment thus seems to require even more attention and effort from top management than a traditional staffing procedure. It is, therefore, of utmost importance to investigate whether voluntarily enrolled project participants are actually more motivated than traditionally recruited participants, and also to investigate whether more motivated participants perform better. Due to many situational factors influencing project work, it is, of course, not possible to reach answers to these two questions that are valid in all situations. Nonetheless, we recommend top management to be very conscious about the strengths and weaknesses of voluntary enrolment before implementing this procedure, as some of the weaknesses can be offset if top management engages itself in the process.

Returning to the starting point of this article: Considering the expected motivation of the project participants, voluntary enrolment seems to be a good way of staffing projects. However, the results presented show that voluntary enrolment may not be able to achieve a sufficiently large number of participants in the projects. Therefore, if the goal of the organisation is a high number of accomplished projects, staffing by voluntary enrolment may not be the best option. However, if the goal of the organisation primarily is to accomplish only projects that are perceived as worth participating in by a large part of the organisation, staffing by voluntary enrolment may be the right choice because only projects that appeal to a sufficient number of people will acquire enough enrollers.

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