

# **Mobilidade de Habilidades Percebidas: um Quadro Teórico e Estudo de Caso entre Trabalhadores Poloneses na Noruega**

*Perceived Skills Mobilisation: A Theoretical Framework and Case Study among Polish workers in Norway*

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**Resumo:** Este artigo discute o uso de trabalhadores poloneses na Noruega. O foco será sobre como e em que medida as competências gerais definidas por trabalhadores poloneses é usado e como se mobilizam a maior parte desta base de competências sendo considerada como uma vantagem competitiva. Vou apresentar dois estudos de caso, a fim de ilustrar e discutir alguns dos pontos do quadro teórico, e as descobertas que foram feitas por outras pessoas em relação aos trabalhadores poloneses na Noruega. Uma constatação é que, visualizando trabalhadores poloneses principalmente como mão de obra (barata), as empresas estão perdendo muitas habilidades que eles poderiam ter usado para melhorar rotinas e produtos.

**Palavras-Chave:** Economia regional; Mobilidade; Polônia; Noruega.

**Abstract:** This article discusses the use of Polish workers in Norway. The focus will be on how and to what extent the overall skills set of Polish workers is used and whether mobilising a greater part of this skills base is regarded as a competitive advantage. I will present two case studies in order to illustrate and discuss some of the points in the theoretical framework, and the findings that have been made by others in relation to Polish workers in Norway. One finding is that by viewing Polish workers primarily as (cheap) labour, companies are missing out on many skills that they could have used to improve routines and products.

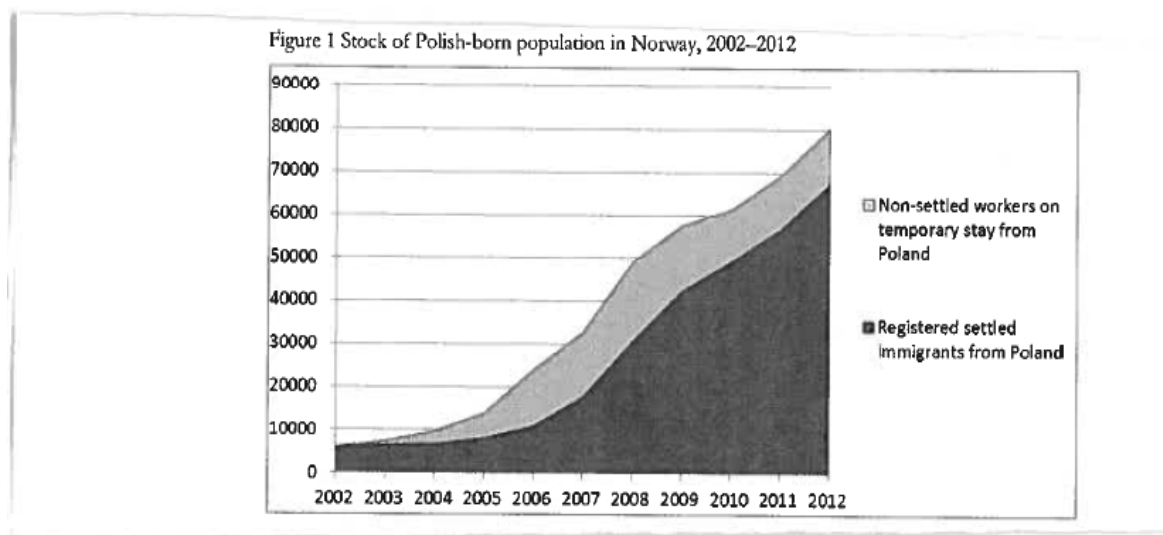
**Keywords:** Regional Economics; Mobility; Polish; Noeway.

**JEL:** J61; R1.

## **Introduction**

In the aftermath of the expansions of the EU/EFTA in 2004 and 2007, employment-related immigration to the Nordic countries increased substantially (DØLVIK & ELDRING, 2008) and the domestic work-life systems of the affected countries have been put under considerable pressure. The flow of Polish job immigrants after the expansion of EFTA – the inner market for the region – in 2004 represents the largest-ever wave of migration to Norway.

The number of Polish workers in Norway in 2012 is calculated as about 80000 (FRIBERG, 2013, p. 11). Most of these are to be found in the building and construction sector.



*Fig. 1 - Number of Polish workers in Norway*

This heavy immigration is due primarily to a great need for workforce in a number of industrial sectors in Norway. The “import” of workers from abroad is regarded as both a good and inexpensive solution (FRIBERG, 2012). It is good in the sense that the Polish workers are regarded as both skilled and willing to work. They are also inexpensive in terms of salary costs and less demanding than Norwegian employees in relation to salary and working conditions. As such we can suggest that the import of Polish workers has been an important factor for maintaining the competitiveness of Norwegian companies in heavy industry.

Access to good skills is a key factor in the new knowledge-based economy (SIGGARD JENSEN, 2012), and in Norway this has been partly solved in certain sectors by means of the large-scale import of workers from abroad. Some people claim that this is a form of social dumping (ALOS & ELDRING, 2008).

In this article I do not wish to take up questions around social dumping or to discuss the question of poor pay and working conditions for Polish workers. My focus will be on how and to what extent the overall skills set of Polish workers is used and whether mobilising a greater part of this skills base is regarded as a competitive advantage. In other words, can it be the case that if one were better at making use of all the skills that Polish workers bring with them, this would produce an additional competitive advantage, assuming that salary and working conditions are comparable?

The starting point for this question is the common observation that people have a broad skills base, with a wide variety of skills, knowledge and experience. In a working connection it will often be the case that only a small selection of this skills base will be deployed (NORDHAUG, 2004). If we were able to mobilise more of the overall skills base, this would provide us with a competitive advantage. This is a logical consequence of the knowledge economy’s thesis that skills provide an important competitive advantage (Westeren, 2012). In our society, the problem is not primarily a lack of skills in the individual employee but the challenge of using individual skills to promote joint effort and wealth creation. This way of thinking is in line with international research which shows that some of the world’s most successful companies achieve extraordinary results using “ordinary” people (O’REILY OG

PFEFFER, 2000). This finding is also supported by motivational theory, as it is seen that *perceived skills mobilisation* (DECI & RYAN, 1985; KUVAAS & DYSVIK, 2012) is a very important contribution to motivation in a work context.

In the following article I would like to examine the skills base as a concept and as a resource. I will relate this to a theoretical framework for the mobilisation of skills and the connection between personal perceived skills and allocated tasks (the so-called flow-zone), self-determination and the development of inner motivation. In this connection I will examine the effects of skills mobilisation and which factors can contribute to the promotion of perceived skills mobilisation. On this basis I will raise a number of leadership-related consequences for those who wish to make use of more of the available skills base. The discussion in this respect will include the matter of liberating leadership - *empowerment*.

On this basis I will approach an empirical plane by looking at research that has been carried out on Polish workers in the Norwegian labour market. Finally I will present two case studies in order to illustrate and discuss some of the points in the theoretical framework and the findings that have been made by others in relation to Polish workers in Norway.

## **2. Skills as a resource**

A skills base is a compound and complex term. Skills are often built into people or are laid down in actions in the form of tacit knowledge and as such are less controllable and more varied than other kinds of resources. A skilled craftsman does not only possess the required certificates and formal training; his or her skills are often related to having “a good hand”, acquired through many years of practical work. Lai (2004) has a definition that tells us something about basic characteristics of the skills concept, while at the same time she points to the organisational significance of a skills base:

*“A skills base consists of the collected knowledge, skills, abilities and attitude that make it possible to carry out relevant functions and tasks in accordance with defined requirements and goals within an organisation.”*  
(LAI 2004, p. 48)

An important point regarding a skills base is that it does not just comprise the skills that are currently used by individuals in the workplace but also the skills that for one reason or another are underused or dormant. For this reason we refer to the importance of *skills mobilisation*. In the diagram below I have illustrated that the skills requirement in an organisation can be met by various forms of access to skills, through recruitment, training and development activities and through the mobilisation of existing skills.



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Fig. 2 - Skills needed in the organization

It is also the case that the coupling between skills and the enhancement of performance and achievement in working life is extremely complex. Any possible improvements depend not only on staff skills but equally on effectively suiting tasks to the skill level and motivation of individuals. Focussing too strongly on acquiring a skills base through recruitment and/or staff development often leads to overlooking the possibility of making use of skills already held by individuals but which for one reason or another has not been mobilised and put to use. It is also the case that motivation plays an important role in our work-related performance. I would therefore like to look a little at motivation in relation to skills mobilisation.

### 3. Perceived skills mobilisation and motivation

According to the theory of self-motivation, employees must have faith in their own skills if they are to have inner motivation for a task. Deci & Ryan (1995) define individuals as having an inner motivation when they are personally involved – when a spontaneous feeling of satisfaction can be associated with their effort. Individuals with an inner motivation are engaged in activities that interest them and which they do entirely of their own free will. When actions are externally motivated, on the other hand, they are not the result of personal interest but are regarded as instrumental in relation to some sort of consequence such as a reward or the avoidance of punishment. Increased motivation leads, among other things, to more self-prompted action and greater cognitive flexibility, which in turn leads to increased creativity and innovation. Many studies show that inner motivation has many positive effects for the individual and the organisation (KUVAAS & DYSVIK, 2012), in relation to positive self-image, the desire to work and achieving goals.

Belief in personal skills is however not enough to improve performance: it is also necessary to have the opportunity to use these skills. The potential that exists in the form of knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes must be mobilised by means of relevant opportunities, tasks and challenges if it is to contribute to performance and value creation.

Lai (2011) refers to the importance of employees feeling that they are able to use their whole skills repertoire. She uses the term *perceived skills mobilisation* in reference to the extent to which an employee has adequate opportunities to employ their own skills in their present job. Research suggests that an employee's sense of

being able to use their skills is an important motivational factor, which is related to job satisfaction and mastery (GOTVASSLI & HAUGSET, 2010). A low degree of skills mobilisation seems conversely to be connected to poorer performance, lower job satisfaction and lower organisational affiliation (ParKER et. al, 2003; ERDOGAN & BAUER, 2009).

#### **4. The effects of perceived skills mobilisation**

Perceived skills mobilisation – the experience of being able to use one’s own skills – seems to have a number of positive effects for both individuals and organisations. Lai (2011) refers to three important factors which seem to be positively influenced by employees feeling that they are able to use their skills in the course of their work at a nursery school. The first factor is *inner motivation* – the employee being inspired to greater effort without being asked. Another factor is a *closer emotional attachment* to the workplace organisation. A third factor is that the individual is *less disposed to leave* the organisation.

These positive effects arise from a direct connection between perceived skills mobilisation and concrete tasks that need to be addressed, providing a positive experience of the feeling of mastery. Over a period, this kind of inner motivation for the work we carry out in an organisation spread into a general pride and pleasure in working within the organisation.

#### **5. What promotes perceived skills mobilisation?**

Lai (2004, 2011) refers to studies which point to the following four factors which often promote a perception of skills mobilisation.

##### **5.1 Tasks equating to personal skills**

An important driving force for perceived skills mobilisation is the experience of a connection between personal skills and the tasks that are to be carried out. In other words, it is important that employees feel that their skills are appreciated and used properly. That the tasks to be carried out are suited to an employee’s knowledge, skills and experience seems to be a very important factor for perceived skills mobilisation. This is the main element in the often-cited model *The Concept of Flow* (CSIKSZENTMIHALY, 1975), which postulates that an individual has a strong personal motivation and feels a sense of “flow” when they experience a connection between their own skills and the tasks they are to carry out.

##### **5.2 Belief in personal skills**

A positive connection is also seen between belief in personal mastery, inner motivation and perceived skills mobilisation. Employees with a belief in their own skills and who find that these are used will also have a stronger personal motivation and will dare to put their skills into use.

##### **5.3 Autonomy**

Autonomy involves the experience of being able to make choices and of being able to act from free will rather than being directed by others. Autonomy is therefore a central factor in personal-motivation theory and is regarded as one of the most important prerequisites for developing and retaining inner motivation. Meta-studies suggest that autonomy is the most important of the three principal factors in personal-motivation theory (belief in personal skills, autonomy and belonging) in terms of explaining inner motivation (HUMPREY, NAHRGANG & MORGESON, 2007).

If this is to work, the individual employee must evidently be given freedom and flexibility in the workplace.

#### 5.4 Sense of belonging

Surveys of the fourth factor – a sense of belonging – show that it is those employees who to the greatest extent receive a sense of belonging by means of support from leaders and colleagues who also to the greatest extent feel that they are able to make use of their skills.

#### 5.5 Empowerment

I have referred to connections between perceived skills mobilisation and inner motivation for work. In research terms, a positive connection has been demonstrated between skills mobilisation, inner motivation and what is termed empowerment. This means that the employee who has the experience of putting his or her own skills to use will be more “self-driven” and more internally motivated if they experience that they are given authority (THOMAS & VELTHOUSE, 1990).

“Empowerment” refers to authority. Power, however, can have several meanings, such as authority, capacity or energy. To empower can therefore mean “to energize” and it is this interpretation of the term that is most suited to the discussion of workplace motivation. The four kinds of feeling associated with empowerment are:

*Autonomy* – a feeling of freedom to make decisions regarding how the work is to be carried out, with a resulting sense of personal responsibility for these choices. The employee’s self-determination is defined as the degree of available choice. If the action is self-determined, the individual experiences making a genuine choice. A controlling environment leads to an individual feeling a greater or lesser degree of force. Controlling environments employ a variety of means such as threats, rules, deadlines, evaluations or competitiveness in order to make an individual think, feel or behave in a particular manner. An employee who constantly feels watched, controlled and minutely regulated will in due course lose the will to do a good job.

*Perceived skill-level* refers to a belief in one’s own ability to carry out a job in a good manner. An employee’s perceived skill level is thus defined as their own understanding of their qualifications and skill in relation to carrying out a job. This is where the employee’s subjective evaluation of their own skill level comes into play, something that does not necessarily correspond to their actual skill level.

*Meaningfulness* is the degree to which what a person does is regarded as valuable in relation to their personal beliefs, attitudes and values. Meaning is also related to the feeling that the work an individual does within a company is useful and positive.

*Influence* is defined as the belief that an individual is attaining the desired effects and has control over the desired results through the manner in which the work is approached.

An empowering leadership style thus energizes employees. Important factors in this kind of leadership include developing employee influence over work, allowing the employee to try things out and to have a feeling of mastering the work. Organising the workload in such a way as to provide opportunities for personal influence and independent decision making are also important factors.

## **6. Polish workers in Norway – perceived skills mobilisation, control or empowerment?**

Up to now I have pointed out how effects of perceived skills mobilisation – using an individual’s personal skills base to master work-related tasks – affects inner motivation. This is also influenced by empowering leadership and workplace autonomy. The question is thus to what extent Polish workers find these qualities in the working conditions of their Norwegian workplaces.

Not much research has been carried out on this question, but a large-scale interview-based survey of Norwegian employers and Polish workers may shed some light on this issue (FRIBERG, 2013).

Norwegian employers point out that Poles are so popular on Norwegian building sites because they work hard without asking questions. During interviews, one of the employers also said that the main strength of the Polish workers is that they quite simply do as they are told. The Norwegian employers also were of the opinion that even though the Poles are good at heavy work and tasks that can be carried out by unskilled labourers, they are not equally well suited to more advanced work.

The employers stated that the permanent jobs often require independent thinking, good planning and an ability to make decisions. That Poles do not ask questions, is thus a problem rather than an advantage, they said.

According to Friberg (2013), employers believe that the differences between Norwegian and Polish workers are related to the different working cultures in the two countries. Freedom with responsibility is “entirely unknown for them”, said one of those interviewed, and added that employers “have to check every last detail because they (the Poles) are used to being told what to do all the time”.

When Friberg interviewed the Poles about their working conditions, a different picture emerged, which contrasted with the employers’ perception of them as not independent. The answers given suggest that the Polish workers would like to make decisions, wish to be involved and were not without questions in relation to the work that they were asked to carry out. They also felt that their skills were only used to a very limited extent. Most of the Polish workers who were interviewed would very much like a permanent job involving decision making and other tasks requiring knowledge and experience. The Poles dislike not being allowed to ask questions about what they are doing or to suggest other ways of carrying out tasks. In the interviews, they said that this sometimes leads to situations in which they have to do jobs again, even though they knew in advance that the job was being done incorrectly.

## **7. The Polish stereotype**

How do these attitudes arise? Friberg (2013) explains it as follows. Because employers rarely manage to map employee experience and ability in a proper manner, temporary workers are often selected on the basis of a group identity. Since Polish workers are regarded as hard workers, this stereotype gives them some advantages. The problem is that the stereotype also provides disadvantages. By working hard without asking questions, the Poles reinforce the impression that the Norwegian employers have of them. The stereotype becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. When they are defined as different they have to behave differently in order to fulfil the expectations of their employers, explains Friberg.

Stang (2008) has arrived at many of the same conclusions. She has investigated the connection between the extent of employment immigration, organisational change and learning in this type of business – the building sector. The starting point for her study was an expectation that employment-related immigration could affect processes of learning and change within the building sector. The extent of the employment-related immigration can lead to an increased transmission of skills and knowledge across national borders. A multi-lingual and multi-cultural workplace can also make new demands in relation to interaction, coordination, organisation and management of working processes on building sites.

It is true that substantial challenges are associated with having a widely disparate workforce in terms of working culture, traditions and differing skills regimes, but at the same time, this is a potential source of increased productivity and creative development (URSTAD, 2012). This is a view that can be traced back to Mary Parker Follett (1924, p. ix): *“We seek a richly diversified experience where every difference strengthens and reinforces the other”*.

Stang’s findings show that knowledge transfer and the use of Polish workers’ skills occur to a very limited extent. The Polish workers were to a very limited degree regarded as a versatile resource that could be used for purposes other than purely labour-intensive tasks. In addition, the Polish workers did not take part in planning meetings or morning meetings and were also not included in the informal conversations at lunch breaks. The study also showed that the employers are little concerned with what skills the Polish workers have beyond working with simple, labour-intensive tasks. An example of this was qualified Polish engineers who were working on clearing a building site. As with Friberg (2013), Stang found that many Polish workers desired more involvement, more influence and to be used for more complex tasks.

We see here a clear picture indicating that Norwegian employers are little interested in the overall skills of Polish workers. They are generally given simple but labour-intensive tasks to carry out and are not significantly involved in the judgements and decisions that need to be made in the various building projects. A high degree of close regulation and work supervision is also a dominant feature. Such an attitude also means, naturally, the loss of many skills that could have been used for learning and value creation in the business. The research to which I have referred above also indicates that this kind of controlling behaviour and lack of autonomy will have a negative effect on personal motivation and the development of inner motivation.



## **8. Data and method**

I will now use two case studies to shed light on some of the issues that have been raised in the theoretical survey and in previous research in the area. The following themes will be explored:

To what extent are skills and skills mobilisation regarded as a competitive advantage?

How and to what extent are the skills of Polish workers identified?

The “Polish stereotype”- What is the image of Polish workers in the Norwegian workplace?

How and to what extent are efforts being made to mobilise the skills of Polish workers?

The empirical basis is information drawn from studies of documents and of the websites of company X Ltd and Y Ltd. Interviews/conversations have also been carried out with the managing directors of the companies and with the HR director in company Y. The companies were chosen because they represent somewhat different aspects of the use of Polish workers. The one company is primarily a recruitment and hire firm for Polish workers, while the other company recruits some Polish workers itself.

### **8.1 A little about the companies**

X is a staffing agency engaged in rental of well-qualified personnel to the engineering industry. They provide personnel for plate/welding with all types of certificates and engineers in several disciplines. They have about 450 employees and through their partners in Poland, potential access to additional hundreds of qualified people in the specific disciplines. Through another company they are also engaged in rental of medical personnel to the Norwegian medical and welfare sectors.

Y offers a broad range of scaffolding services. Y is a young scaffolding company, but due to their origins in Aker Verdal AS they have a broad experience as supplier of scaffolding services for industrial purposes. They have employees possessing high theoretical and practical skills that have been acquired through many years of experience both from onshore and offshore projects.

### **8.2 Method: Two case studies as a starting point**

According to Yin (2009), this type of case study will provide an opportunity to employ and explore existing theories within an area (skills mobilisation) and as such create a basis for casting light on existing theory and empiricism in the area, possibly adjusting or revising the theory by adding new ideas. Maaløe (1996) calls this approach “*Analytic generalisation*”, an inferring technique in which one or more cases are studied in the light of one or more theses (e.g. in respect of skills mobilisation) to see 1) whether and 2) to what extent the characteristics revealed support or are in conflict with hitherto-known explanations. This then becomes a support for finding out the validity of the thesis and thus 3) forms the basis for new theses. An exploratory-integrating approach thus involves formulating an expectation regarding specific connections, expressed as a theoretically-based scenario, and a subsequent critical revision of this as the results from field work become apparent. Maaløe (1996, p. 76) defines explorative integration as follows:

*“... by means of refuting, confirming and developing theories, as well as uncovering one’s own predispositions, reaching a greater understanding both of the area to be studied and of the process of studying”.*

Analytical generalisation thus attempts to integrate theoretically-based views with empirical findings. The study will bear traits of research - exploration. The term “explorative-integrating study” will therefore be used to denote a method that aims to assess established theory, to determine whether it still has an important function, and to contribute to the development of new theories, or at least to identify possible new contributions to existing theory; all in a manner that challenges our own theories, preconceptions and expectations of empirical findings.

In the theoretical interpretative studies, the main point is that the selected case studies are regarded as typical for a class of phenomena about which a certain degree of knowledge already exists. A theoretical interpretation of a case, in the light of existing concepts and theories, provides criteria for empirical relevance, as well as emphasising that different aspects of case-study material can open the way for other theoretical interpretations.

The purpose of my study is therefore not hypothesising or the generation of a new theory, but to examine, with the help of two selected case studies, how the findings relate to existing theory and prior available empiricism about the phenomenon, thus gaining a better understanding of the area of skills mobilisation among Polish workers in Norway.

## **9. Case 1 - X**

The business concept of X Ltd is to recruit and hire out qualified overseas (primarily Polish) workers at a competitive wage. The main market is relatively-large companies in the mechanical-industry sector. They rent out personnel within plate/welding with all types of certification, as well as engineers in several disciplines. The managing director is clear that their competitive advantage lies in that they can deliver well-qualified workers. As such it is important to recruit the right individuals and to ensure quality assurance throughout the recruitment process. Since much of the work requires some kind of specialisation in the form of various certifications, it is extremely important to ensure that workers who are hired possess the skills required for the certification. For this, the company has itself been obliged to undertake checks/training in Poland or in Norway. Experience indicates that certificates issued by a third party cannot be relied upon.

*“Various certificates and other types of qualifications can easily be bought on the street in Poland, which means that we have been obliged to take responsibility for this process ourselves. Our strongest competitive advantage lies precisely in our ability to deliver a qualified and well-skilled workforce, for a competitive wage, naturally. We adhere to Norwegian employment agreements and do not deal in social dumping of workforce.”*

This kind of certification requirement also makes it easier to suit the qualifications to the type of work. Certification involves mastery of some kind of special task, and in both the recruitment and hiring-out process, X regards it as very important to get a good match between skills held and work allocated. As Managing

Director he expresses it as follows: *“Our success is based on our supplying the skills that we promise to deliver.”*

We see that for this type of specialist worker it is relatively straightforward to get a good match between perceived skills and job content. It is more of a challenge to achieve this for highly-skilled workers such as engineers, nurses and doctors.

*“For an engineer, it is of course very frustrating in the long term to be set to simple clearing work on a building site. This is very poor use of an individual’s skills. We try in principle to avoid this kind of mismatch between skills and tasks. But of course it is primarily the employer’s responsibility to deal with this. The customer must see the potential that is there and deal with it.”*

In addition to quality assurance of technical standards through certification and professional training, X also invests in language courses so that the Polish workers can adapt more easily to the Norwegian work market.

*“This is an important element if the Poles are to make use of their skills in a Norwegian workplace.”*

Despite some challenges with recruiting Polish workers, the general impression gained by X is that the employers are well satisfied with their qualifications and not least with their work ethic. This confirms the image of employees who are well-motivated workers who both can and will deliver. The problem of unused skills is not regarded as especially significant in relation to the type of specialist worker for which certification and approval is required. Here it is relatively straightforward to achieve skills mobilisation, as both the demands of the work and the qualification requirements are fairly precisely specified. The challenge of skills mobilisation is primarily related to highly-educated individuals who have a more generally-applicable skills set.

## **10. Case 2 - Y**

The core business of Y is scaffolding, enterprises, rental of scaffolds and of scaffolding materials and as secondary products, crane and heavy-truck operators. They have about 150 employees, including about 100 Norwegians, and a mix of Swedes and Polish workers.

The company finds it extremely demanding to recruit enough qualified workers, but has chosen primarily to undertake this themselves rather than using a recruitment firm. Among other things, they use NAV (the local labour office), the EURES network, their own recruitment meetings and advertising in both Sweden and Poland.

As with X, Y depends on a skilled and motivated workforce at a competitive price. Even though there are some differences between Norwegian workers and foreign (Polish) ones in terms of salary level, the company follows the recommended tariffs approved by the trade unions, thus avoiding any form of social dumping of workers. Foreign workers also receive working-away compensation and a food allowance.

The leaders in Y believe that some of the keys to skills mobilisation and motivation among workers are to understand cultural differences in leadership. The HR manager puts it this way:

*“Norwegians: Long-term employment. High commitment to the task in hand and to the employer. Formality-driven – legal rights are very important and contracts are a must. Democratic: we work in groups and we fight for our rights in groups. Soft leadership is necessary. They like to be given a challenge and find the solutions themselves.*

*Swedish: Project-oriented. Individualistic. They trade work for money. Low commitment. They abandon ship when a better vessel shows up. Long CVs (if they have one) with numerous employers. Non-contractual. May accept hire by a handshake. Tough personality. Often hard workers. They will only accept Norwegian leadership if the leader is very skilful.*

*Polish: Hard workers in the beginning of their employment. Once they feel safe, the energy decreases. Often very skilled. Work in groups with a strong non-formal hierarchy. Two groups. They demand tough leadership, and find the Norwegian way of leading too soft. They do what they are told. Do not like challenges. Afraid of doing something wrong which may endanger their employment. They like strong contracts, but it’s no problem to work more than regulations allow.”*

In relation to the skills mobilisation issue, the leaders in Y, like those at X, believe that this primarily applies to individuals with a very high level of formal education – in particular university education. Here there will often be a substantial gap between the individual’s qualifications and the work that they carry out.

*“For ordinary skilled workers I do not believe that this is a great problem; after all, we have certification and approvals which mean that there will be a good correspondence. Besides, the most important motivation for Polish workers to come to Norway is better pay and conditions. As such, financial incentives often override other motivational factors.*

*Why should Polish workers demand more involvement and responsibility when they have a working situation in which they can use their technical skills and get a good salary?”*

At the same time, he admits that for some workers it would be possible to use more of their skills, but that it would probably take a long time for them to adapt to the Norwegian way of understanding the organisation and its leadership style.

*“It would take a long time to ease them in to the Norwegian work culture with its stronger degree of involvement, participation and responsibility.”*

## **11. Analysis**

The starting point for the study was to examine how and to what extent the overall skills of Polish workers is deployed. Both theory and research in this area (Lai, 2011) show that the concept of *perceived skills mobilisation* – the degree to which an employee receives adequate opportunities to draw their own skills into their present job – is an important motivational factor. This is important because skilled and motivated employees will be a central competitive factor in most companies.

Even though the two case studies have different starting points – a staffing agency and a scaffolding company – the views and experiences that emerge are relatively similar. I might also add that my three informants have a very long experience in different posts in the Norwegian mechanical-industry sector.

For both cases, the key is to recruit qualified workers for a competitive price. Much work must therefore be carried out to map skills and to set the “correct” salary level. Both of these elements involve difficulties. It is difficult to gain an overview of the individual’s skills, especially informal, implicit knowledge. Formal qualifications in the form of education and diplomas are easier to identify, even though experience here shows that the companies themselves need to take responsibility for verifying these as there is a certain amount of false study records and certificates.

Both companies have chosen to work positively together with the Norwegian authorities and trade unions in terms of salary and conditions of work. This means that the salary and conditions of work for the Polish workers are favourable in comparison with the conditions that have been uncovered in some other places in Norway that have used Polish workers. The companies believe that this has a strong ethical aspect and that they would not be willing to enter a market that uses social dumping as a competitive factor.

What, then, about what was termed the “Polish stereotype”? All three informants were of the clear opinion that Polish workers are competent, hard-working and expect clear and unambiguous leadership. A good match of skills to the work being carried out, salary and other benefits are given as the most important reasons for this willingness to work. As such, the general view of the popularity of Polish workers in the Norwegian workplace is also confirmed here.

Workers from Norway, and to some extent from other countries, are described as somewhat different, with a greater wish for participation, involvement and a flatter leadership structure. In common with the findings of Friberg (2013), employers believe that this has its background in the work cultures of other countries.

Previous research (STANG, 2008, FRIBERG, 2013) refers to interviews with Polish workers which suggest that they would willingly make decisions and be involved, and that they were not without their questions about the work they were being told to do. They also believed that their skills were only being used to a moderate degree.

When confronted with this issue, my informants believed that this primarily involved workers with a high level of formal qualifications, rather than workers with some kind of specialist qualification such as various certifications and approvals. The latter will to a reasonably-high degree satisfy their need for a good match between perceived skills and work tasks, and as such will often be in the “flow zone”.

One of the explanations for the difference between my findings and those of others may be that the choice of companies was dissimilar. Stang and Friberg use informants from the building trade, while mine were from the mechanical-engineering sector. A difference here is that the mechanical-engineering sector has greater requirements for specialist qualifications in the form of various types of certification and approvals, while in the building trade there are very many work-intensive jobs that do not demand any particular specialist qualifications. Another obvious difference is that in my case studies I have not used Polish workers as direct informants.

Earlier studies have only to a limited degree isolated and discussed different types of skills and opportunities for skills mobilisation. There can be grounds for a more nuanced approach, distinguishing between different types of skills or qualifications and examining the relationship between skills, work tasks and motivation. The point is that different types of skills have different prerequisites for skills mobilisation and therefore require different measures in order to attain a

similar skills mobilisation. To bring out the difference between the various types of skills we can use the following matrix:

		<b>Organisational distinctiveness</b>	
		<b>LOW</b>	<b>HIGH</b>
<b>Task distinctiveness</b>	<b>LOW</b>	I – Meta-skills	III – Intra-organisational skills
	<b>HIGH</b>	II – Operative standard skills	IV – Unique skills

Fig. 3 Different types of skills

In category I we have very general skills which can be used for many tasks and in many organisations. These types of skills are often termed meta-skills and may consist, for instance, of general literacy skills. They can also consist of very high formal qualifications such as a Master’s degree. Skills with a high task distinctiveness but low organisational distinctiveness cover the type of standard operative skill that can be used in many organisations but for a very limited selection of work operations. A typical example of this might be a certification that only applies to certain types of welding but which can be used in many different companies within the mechanical-engineering sector. Type III skills feature a low degree of task distinctiveness but a high organisational distinctiveness. This would include knowledge, skills and abilities to do something that is not of special value in external employment markets but which might be very useful in relation to a whole range of functions within one specific company. This could be general procedures or methods that are only applicable to the one organisation. Insight into the business culture of an organisation will be useful when working in that particular company but not so important when working elsewhere. Type IV has both high task distinctiveness and high organisation distinctiveness. This type of unique skill base is very specific and can only be used within a specific organisation. This may be entirely specific production methods and technologies that are unique to the business. Such skills will be hard to find on the external labour market.

We see here that the challenges in relation to skills mapping and skills mobilisation are different for each of these four skills types. The stronger our task distinctiveness, the easier it is to specify skills requirements and relate them to suitable tasks. If this type of skill also has a low organisational distinctiveness, in other words can be used in many different businesses, there should be good opportunities to find a job in which the work will make full use of one’s skills. The skills can be used for specific purposes and the skills of each individual can be matched with different tasks. As we have mentioned, different types of certification and approvals are a good example of this. In the skills mobilisation theory we have seen that the strongest driving force for this was a good match between skills and work tasks and the feeling of mastery – of using one’s skills in a good way. Examined in relation to the way that both X and Y work with this, it appears that it is in precisely this type of skills set – operative standard skills – that there are good opportunities for perceived skills mobilisation.

In contrast, there will be considerable challenges in exploiting high generalised qualifications as they are difficult to specify and difficult to match with specific tasks. There are grounds to believe that Polish workers with a relatively-high academic education will have a great deal of general knowledge and that it will be difficult to map their whole skills base and to find suitable tasks. In this case, a longer period of time and some leadership intervention in relation to greater autonomy, influence and participation will be needed in order to experience a greater degree of skills mobilisation.

## **Summary**

The debate about employment-related immigration should not only revolve around social dumping, but also take account of learning and knowledge transfer. By viewing Polish workers primarily as (cheap) labour, companies are missing out on many skills that they could have used to improve routines and products.

My analyses can suggest that the problem with exploiting the skills of Polish workers is primarily related to those who have broadly-based skills, or qualifications that essentially are not tied to a form of specialisation in the shape of certification and approvals. This type of meta-skills will be little task-specific and organisation-specific. Polish workers who hold specific certification and approvals will have a type of skills base that is termed standard operative skills. This is in principle much easier to map and to match to relevant work tasks, and as such the opportunity for perceived skills mobilisation will be evidently present. Since I have not used Polish workers as informants here – only employers – this assumption is something that should be followed up in future studies. The few studies that hitherto have been carried out have not investigated to any great extent whether certain types of skills are easier or more difficult to mobilise, from the viewpoint of the Polish workers.

If highly-qualified Polish workers are to be able to make better use of their assets, it seems that it is important to spend time on this so that they can be eased in to the Norwegian work culture. Among other measures that can be used in this respect is an induction programme. The goal is that every employee should be able to familiarize themselves with company culture and familiarize themselves with all aspects of the company – “this is how we do things here”, “this is what we expect of you as an employee” and “this is what you can expect of us as employers”.

Another possibility is the use of a “buddy”. If the employee has a query he could approach the “buddy” with it; similarly, the “buddy” could include the new employee in various aspects of the company. One may, however, ask whether this would be counter-productive in that it may reinforce the existing power differential. A final suggestion, which has a great potential, is to break up the segregation between Norwegian and Polish workers who are in separate work teams. Mixed teams will create a better feeling of integration and belonging for all employees. This will also lower the possibility of error. The system would also be less vulnerable in that it would no longer be dependent on one person translating between the teams, as is the case at present.

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