

16 The Norwegian workplace hustle

A crisis of shifting national identity

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Her bustling workplace is a virtual sea of gray cubicles stretching as far as the eye can see, and it's as loud as it is soulless, the room's concrete walls and steel rafters magnifying all the normal office sounds. But Eldrid¹ is oblivious. Seemingly immune to the ringing phones, busy foot traffic, and clicking computer keyboards, she keeps glancing at the to-do list propped up just to the right of her computer. Eldrid is the consummate multi-tasker; nothing holds her attention for very long, but of course it can't, for there's so much, really much too much, needing doing. Peering over her thick, black-framed reading glasses, she restlessly scrolls through her latest emails. Does she have time to squeeze in a few more phone calls? She slides her chair around to double-check the deadline dates she has scribbled on the white board behind her, and then – as if by habit – steals a glance up at the big clock over the elevators on the north entrance wall. It's always struck her as a cruel juxtaposition – a dictatorial device positioned directly over the elevators, with their promise of liberation. Seeing the clock's big sweep hand ticking away the seconds, she sighs, putting her hands over her eyes and frowning in frustration and despair. There's no way she'll have enough time to meet that last deadline, is there?

Co-workers walk by and occasionally attempt to trade greetings, but Eldrid appears deaf. It's as if they're talking to a robot; as one task is completed, another gets entered into the big database marked "pending." There's hardly a trace of a unique individual left in her mechanistic movements; even her eyes appear glazed. This is her first real job since graduating from college, and "job" describes it all too well. The corporate world has swallowed her whole.

Everything in that world – deadline to deadline to deadline – has an order, but it still feels like chaos. There are never enough minutes in the day, she feels, and every minute carries a sense of high urgency. It's enough to drive a conscientious person crazy.

At one point her boss knocks peremptorily on the sliding door to her cubicle, only to burst in before she can answer. He is a man of considerable intellectual stature, but he's always made her uneasy with his counterfeit smile and demanding nature. Eldrid looks up, then reflexively shrinks back in her chair, instantly on the defensive. She speaks first.

“I’m almost done with the layout of that brochure,” she assures him, thinking to anticipate his latest demand. “I just need another hour or so.”

“Oh, that? You were supposed to be done with that this morning, weren’t you? That’s not what I’m here for. I need you to get me a better picture of the fjords in Romsdal and Sogn to go in the pamphlets for the Western Norway Fjord tour. Also, get me the details on the Haugesund International Jazz festival coming up this August. Oh, and before you leave, decide on a pitch for the Innovative Norway campaign – one that will really grab people’s attention. Remember to record your hours on each project. You’ll need to stay late again.”

As he speaks, Eldrid nervously taps on her desk with one hand and covers her mouth with the other, then searches frantically for her pen. She finally finds it, buried under a stack of loose papers, and adds these new tasks to her to-do list. She feels a little better whenever she can relieve an exhausted memory with pen and paper.

But before she can even think to ask him a question of clarification, her boss scurries out and away like the White Rabbit in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

She sighs, but then realizes there’s no time for sighing, so it’s back to work. This time, reaching too quickly for her mouse to get restarted on her chores, she manages to bump her forearm hard on the sharp edge of the desk and reflexively emits a muffled scream. *That darn arm again*. Over the past few months, she has not been able to fend off a nagging pain there. After consulting some medical info sites on the Internet (for who has time to make a doctor’s appointment anymore?), she’s learned that the pain is likely tendonitis resulting from overuse of her computer mouse. She had meant to buy a wrist pad to help minimize the problem, but she’d forgotten to. She had also meant to buy an anti-inflammatory med, but she hadn’t gotten around to it, either. Somehow, neither had made it onto her list.

Eldrid’s hectic work environment is still something of an anomaly in Norway, a country renowned for its flexible and “feminine” workplace culture. Yet there are recent signs of a drifting away from that traditional culture. Frenzied workers and a cult of time efficiency are becoming increasingly commonplace in organizations across the country, the result, mostly, of the major urbanization that has accompanied the radical economic changes spurred by the oil strikes in Norway’s continental shelf. While money can solve many problems, experience teaches that it often manages to create newer, more complicated ones, too. Consider Norwegians “experienced.”

Oil and gas have brought unprecedented wealth to the country, and, along with it, a crisis of national identity. For well over half a century the storybook original “Norwegian Dream” was a simple one, and typically agrarian, too: a hard-working person laboring with his hands in the earth, aspiring only to secure the basic necessities – a sound roof overhead, nutritious food on the table, a cow or two out in the pasture, maybe a few chickens, and a close-knit, healthy family. So exemplary of Norwegian culture was this ideal that it was even showcased in 1988 in the “Norway Pavilion” at the Epcot Theme Park’s World Showcase (aka Walt Disney World). This was the image of Norwegian

life that had been sold to people all over the world. Even though Norway's economic growth in the twentieth century had largely come from industries such as textile mills funded by banks in the late nineteenth century, its agricultural sector had always been a staple, with farming, timber, and fishing persisting as the backbone of Norway's economy.

But a lucrative transformation awaited the country. In May 1963, Norway claimed sovereign rights over its sector of the oil-rich North Sea. By the 1980s, Norway was experiencing skyrocketing profits from its engineering and construction investments in the oil-and-gas sector, pushing the country's collective identity away from past accomplishments and toward new ones fuelled by its black gold. Norway has now revamped its once commodity-based economy to one reaping the benefits of windfall cash. Not only has the old "Norwegian Dream" of a modestly comfortable livelihood been fulfilled many times over, it has been overshot as displays of materialism have begun to creep into the country in the form of pricey pads and weekend cabins. The per capita income for the country now stands at \$86,440 US, which is the third highest in the world, surpassed only by that of Monaco and Lichtenstein. This, incidentally, is almost double the per capita income of the US, which, at \$47,240, is the seventeenth-highest in the world (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>).

Yet, as history shows, more money can spawn fresh problems, and as Norway has been transformed in the last four decades by its black gold and urban expansion, this focus on money and material success has begun to leak into other domains, none more so than the urban Norwegian organization. Some call it the "resource curse." You also hear scholars invoking the catchy phrase "petroleum perpetuates patriarchy" to help explain the shift in socio-cultural dynamics that's increasingly seen in Norwegian workplaces. The oil discoveries greatly augmented net family income, but, equally significant, they also greatly increased the father's salary – and with it, his authority. The labor jobs tied to offshore drilling are often male-dominated, as are many oil occupations for the highly educated such as engineering, trading, legal services, and architecture.

Stories like Eldrid's, now proliferating, suggest that adaptation to the patriarchal oil industry in Norway is at least indirectly responsible for "masculinizing" the Norwegian organization in the form of stricter hierarchies, more labor-intensive demands, and lots more deadlines and overtime. While this shift toward a highly competitive, masculine workplace is not yet the norm in Norway, it's gaining momentum and can be observed most commonly in organizations affiliated with petroleum production, including governmental ones and, in Eldrid's case, tourism operations. Evidence of unprecedented modern workplace stressors tiptoeing into the organization can further be found in the recent increase in Norwegians working hours well beyond the traditional work window of Monday through Friday, 6:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. A 2010 poll indicated that one out of three Norwegians logs time on the weekend, maybe even burning the midnight oil on weeknights as well (Statistics Norway, Labor Force Survey, 2010). Since 37 percent of those working outside normal business hours are women, Eldrid appears hardly alone in the pressures she faces in this brave new world.

Reflecting on her job as a project manager for a tourism center near the Norwegian–Swedish border, Eldrid recalls the acute pressure she faced daily: “I had to write down every hour that I was using. The problem was that I was using too much [time] because I was new. My boss had an impossible time schedule for me. I ended up working a lot of spare ... all of my free time, and because I was single at the time, I could of course do it. So I got this inflammation in one arm.” But would that slow her down? Not a chance. She adds, stoically, “It was not a problem because I could switch the mouse on the computer to the other arm and just learn that.” It appears that Eldrid’s professional zeal and her need to keep her job by staying “productive” sometimes overshadowed her physical health. Eldrid casually mentioned in our interview that her boss’s knowing she was unmarried may have been at least “indirectly” related to the added pressures she encountered there. “I think this happens quite often,” she says, referring to the presumption that single employees have more free time out of the office, “but it is not out in the open.” Thus, even her social needs were frequently subjugated to the demands of her occupation.

After working all of her available overtime and beyond, the result of an ever-growing to-do list dictated by her boss and reinforced by her confessedly “very ambitious” nature, Eldrid claims she “almost hit a wall. I was millimeters away from crashing because you get so tired because you never have time off. I sort of, like, worked myself into a corner You have these periods of really high stress, and then you sort of collapse. You can’t function.”

Nor was she alone in the acute discomfort she felt in the grinder of the workplace. Heidi, (pseudonym) a coworker, actually had what Eldrid called a true burnout: “She was on a sick leave for many months, and continued to work half-time for months after in order to recover.” Eldrid then reflected on the sustainability of asking employees to give 100 percent day in and day out: “You can have a work environment giving you 95 percent during the day for 8 hours. [But] that’s the best you can get. I mean, that’s really an effective day. If you push people too much, they could max out and give you 60 percent, and they have to work for more and more hours to get it in. With more pressure, the percent effectiveness will go down gradually, so what’s the point?” Hearing from lived experience is often more persuasive than reading theoretical accounts about it in a book, but in this case the two merge as Eldrid’s description exemplifies the price of workplace burnout that scholars have been warning managers and employees about for decades. (“Burnout,” interestingly, was coined in 1974.) Chronically pushing workers too hard can eventually take a debilitating toll on them, causing emotional exhaustion, the depersonalized treatment of one’s peers, and a lost sense of personal accomplishment – all of which increase worker apathy while simultaneously decreasing their output.

Norwegian legislators have recently taken up this issue, reflecting a crisis of national identity as concerns with workplace norms grow. Last amended in December 2012, the Working Environment Act is an effort to more tightly regulate the quality of working life in Norway. Addressing critical workplace issues such as workplace flexibility, working hours/overtime, autonomy, and protection

from discrimination, this legislation has served as a cautionary lighthouse to the escalating anxiety and burdens felt by employees in certain Norwegian organizations; it validated their distress calls, much as a lighthouse warns of nearby hazards. But this legislation was more than just a warning. It instructed Norwegians how to avoid the trenches of an impending disaster.²

Even with the noblest of intentions, though, legislation can be effective only if enforced, and the workplace standards spelled out in this Act are both complex and nearly impossible to enforce, as Eldrid's experiences illustrate. Specifically, the Working Environment Act attempts to police five areas:

- (1) *Work content*. It must be varied and give control to workers. (Did Eldrid's to-do list give her some sense of control? Was it varied?)
- (2) *Social relationships*. Employers must permit employee contact with other persons. (How does one define "contact"? Does working the same long hours together qualify?)
- (3) *Compensation*. Pay systems must not lead to the risk of mental or physical damage. (Did Eldrid's boss take advantage of her by implementing a pay system that demanded she work more hours than the company could actually fund?)
- (4) *Work planning*. Employers must ensure personal and professional development for their employees. (Did all of the experience Eldrid gained in such a high-velocity work environment offer professional development?)
- (5) *Conditions under which the work is done*. Employers must standardize working hours so that those hours don't cause mental or physical damage. (Given that Eldrid had to work well beyond her overtime allotment, often into the late-night hours, this is one metric that she might have had difficulty bringing a suit over – though, on paper, it would look to be the easiest standard to measure.)

The issue of working hours is also impacted by the larger workplace norms and culture. Take, for example, Eldrid's boss, Bjørn, (pseudonym) who was intentionally underbidding Ministry of Agriculture jobs in order to knock out the competition. To "win" this battle, he had to accept a sometimes significant reduction in the amount of revenue his company would receive for a given project. Less revenue, of course, meant fewer paid working hours to complete the job. Yet because any such project is contractually required to be finished, Bjørn's underbidding resulted in stealing money from the pockets of his employees and also strapping them with lots of uncompensated overtime.

The result was Eldrid's typical experience on the job. She recalls the time demands and her indispensable, unforgiving, imperious to-do list: "Often I would start the day thinking about and planning how much I would manage to get done during the day, but realizing at the end of the day that my plan had been too ambitious but at the same time thinking that it wouldn't have been possible for me to work any faster or feel more concentrated. That is a frustrating feeling, again inducing stress. Because I had to clock my hours, it also becomes very

visible that you are using more hours than is expected of you, more hours than you have in the budget. The result is that you end up pulling overtime hours that you don't report but that continue to wear you down."

At this point, it seemed as if our interview was almost cathartic for Eldrid. She continued: "Sometimes you just have to admit that you can't do it all. It's not a good feeling and you get really stressed when you see that you have to deliver this by Friday, and you just can't do it." Eldrid found that this sensation of failure bleeds into other aspects of life and creates a residual negative feeling that is hard to shake even when home with family and friends. She recalls walking home at the end of the day "feeling inadequate, being so tired that even shopping for groceries feels like a drag." While this admission would likely alarm the average person, it's particularly telling in Norway, as Norwegians traditionally are big celebrators of food and the shopping for food. Food brings people together, creates and strengthens friendships, and breaks patterns of reticence. Food is often associated here with entertaining guests and enjoying several rounds of cheerful toasts and bouts of roaring laughter. Yet Eldrid's experience clearly undermined this prominent cultural value.

While her workplace frustration has all the ingredients of an engrossing story, what's even more interesting is her diagnosis of the underlying source of that frustration. One would think she would blame her martinet of a boss, yet Eldrid chooses to see most of her stress coming from a piece of paper. Make that a list.

While it's still common for many Norwegians to cock their head in confusion when asked about their use of to-do lists, Eldrid's case illustrates at least one example of an increased orientation toward, and outward insistence on, a particular type of success. This orientation engenders an increased need to *remember* what those criteria for "success" are. Thus, to-do lists appear a sign of the changing times. Aptly so, because – symbolically – with the list comes the good and the evil. As an example, while Eldrid said that the efficiency of a list allowed her to get a "good night's sleep," she also admitted, "In stressed periods, I may have to make notes of all of the things coming to mind after going to bed." So, at such times, she is regularly getting in bed, thinking of something important, getting up, writing it down, feeling relieved, getting back in bed, and repeating this terribly redundant, restless process throughout the night. The list is her salvation, but also her curse. It resolves her worries, but is itself the chief producer of them as it grows and grows, becoming monstrous in both size and effect, consuming all her spare time and distancing her from friends and a social life.

In the same way that Norwegians' "resource curse" is associated with a crisis of national identity, reflecting their ambivalence about their very prosperity, Eldrid shares a similar ambivalence about the to-do list. The list is what guides her, yet it's also the monster that has her by the throat and seems to dominate her every thought. The list is there after the boss has left, and the list keeps the score of her daily achievement, which inevitably is always less than complete. The list sets the standards regarding both reward and reprimand. It determines both how her time will be spent and how far she is from ever feeling "done." When a day is particularly hectic, she says, "then I am more true to my 'to-do' lists because

then I really need to be efficient. And it is more important to structure. And then you have these horrible periods of really high stress. And then you sort of, like, collapse from the stress. You know, you just can't function that much. You just need a moment to exhale, and suddenly an hour has gone by and you were just checking the news on the Web, you know, and you shouldn't be doing that because that was not on my to-do list."

Yet we all know the importance of scheduling time in our day to relax and do something we enjoy. Eleanor Roosevelt, America's former First Lady, once observed: "Sometimes it is extremely good for you to forget that there is anything in the world which needs to be done, and to do some particular thing that you want to do. Every human being needs a certain amount of time in which he can be peaceful." One cannot help but wonder if the urbanization of Norway that accompanied oil production and economic growth has introduced a dangerous new tempo into the country, stealing the rural, seasonal pace that used to stabilize and temper the typical Norwegian organization. Can we assume that with more *kroner* and more workers come more competition, more responsibilities, more fear of failure ... and thus more self-protective, increasingly neurotic list-making?

Eldrid now concedes that "living by the list" is not the best way to carry out the responsibilities of one's job. "I think it is really valuable not to be *too* busy if you have to be innovative like I do in my work," she says, "because it is development work, and you need to have time to talk to people and to be inspired. To-do lists are not very inspiring. They are sort of like action things ... I can't have an exciting phone call with somebody I don't know yet. You can't put that on your to-do list, but you have to prioritize it when it happens because that's where the goals are. I think a lot of things happen when you are busy making other plans. I think it's more about being present in the moment. Instead of a to-do list, it is sort of like working half in the future. You cross out things that you have done in the past, but [you] also need to be able to see things when they come." After a few moments' reflection, she continued: "If you say, 'That's very valuable but I have to do this,' then you miss out. So I think that sometimes it is really positive when you have to put chores over to the next week because maybe something else more important happened. That's why I was really unhappy with this job. It really wasn't development work. It was just *getting the job done*. I hated that."

The thought of routine work makes Eldrid bridle. She despises mindless patterns. So it's no surprise that she works in tourism, an industry accustomed to unpredictable weather, new anthropological and geographical discoveries, and endless streams of adventurous folk from all over the world, no two alike. In her opinion, lists become a form of abuse, a weapon in the toolbox of the manager, since most items on the list carry deadlines, and implicit standards set by others, and also carry a heavy price if they aren't met properly. Lists become, finally, balls and chains that weigh employees down, leaving them stressed and stripped of that sense of well-being and self-esteem that come with self-achievement and others' appreciation.

Accordingly, Eldrid believes that lists should be modified, diversified. Besides tasks, they should also record exploratory directions, newly discovered interests,

ideas for motivation, and activities for inspiration. And the template of the list should be individualized, reflecting how each employee *specifically chooses* to organize his or her time. This would undoubtedly help honor the regulations spelled out in the Working Environment Act, specifically the one that restrains employers from assigning work content that is monotonous and steals control from the workers themselves. Like the “control of work content” issue addressed in the Act, many of the laws put into effect by this piece of important legislation were grossly violated by Eldrid’s boss, and she is sure he was pretty typical. Because he assigned her an endless stream of tasks, each with a strict timeline, he also left no room for ensuring her personal and professional development at work. Because he unethically assigned her more hours than the firm had money to finance, he employed a rigged compensation system that impaired the mental and physical health of his subordinates. And because he exploited Eldrid’s unmarried status and eagerness to please by drowning her in overtime hours, he poked and prodded her to the edge – but expected her not to jump.

Did she?

Eventually, yes she did. Her job had been conditional anyway. When hired for it, she had been informed that she’d be replacing a woman on maternity leave and therefore the position would be guaranteed for only twelve months, after which it would be “up for discussion.” Disgusted with her treatment in the weeks leading up to that twelfth-month decision point, Eldrid decided to finally take her life back into her own hands and revoke her allegiance to her now vilified boss.

“I knew I had the job for twelve months until she returned,” Eldrid recalls. “When the end date was approaching, my boss was still not talking to me about how they liked my work and if they wanted to keep me. I found this irritating and not respectful. At the same time, I had a friend advocating jobs in Bodø and asking me to return to my home county in order to spend time with her, living in the same city. I decided to start applying for other jobs. I got an interview with the Nordland County Administration and told my boss, and *then* he reacted. He told me that they wanted me to stay and that he expected me to continue. I responded that if this was true, I think he should have talked to me about it I interpreted his silence about the time after the contract would expire as a signal that they didn’t want me to stay. He offered me a pay raise, but at this time I had an option. The combination of constant stress in my current job, the promise of a new job, and moving back to Bodø to be with family and friends all affected my decision to leave. I felt *good* when I made my decision to leave.”

While lack of appreciative feedback, not stress, turned out to be the deciding factor leading Eldrid to finally pack her bags, she confessed that she had been too young to thoroughly understand just how poor her work situation really was: “I think when you are young – this was my first real job – you don’t have the experience or anything to compare it to, and you are less conscious of the fact that this job is not a good one.” Yet her final decision to leave, and the culmination of events that led to it, turned out to be for the best. Once she finally took back the reins to her life and found her own direction, she would not be so foolish as to easily hand them over again.

It's now four years down the road, and Eldrid's work life as well as her personal life have dramatically changed. She's now married. And when arriving at her workplace these days, she's now invariably highly spirited and vivacious. She and her lively coworkers at the Nordland Tourist Board spend the first half hour of each morning engaged in personal and collective brainstorming exercises. They'll drink spiced green tea together, scan the newspaper for interesting events, and chat about their weekend and any upcoming work activities and opportunities that spike their enthusiasm. It's all part of what she calls simply "emptying your brain" and getting it ready to think and work creatively. Her new boss, Erik, is super conscious about not letting his workers slip into the bottomless pit of burnout. For example, he refuses to let them punch the clock any time other than Monday through Friday, 8:00 A.M. to 3:30 P.M. "He is really clear on that," Eldrid says. "He often says, 'I think it is important that you go home and relax because I need you here tomorrow and you need to be alert and ready to work.' So that is the work ethic of this company. You work like hell when you are here, and then you go home and have a life outside of work."

The daily to-do lists that used to rule Eldrid's life and pin her to a piece of paper have now been replaced by weekly to-do lists, which, she says, are "more flexible." "If I don't get everything that I want to get accomplished in one day," she says happily, "I just let it roll over to the next, and I don't let it haunt me. After all, I have all week to get it done."

In Eldrid's present organization, no employees can be found on company grounds between Christmas Eve and New Year's Day. Easter brings an equally ghostly vacant office. Eldrid points out that most of her co-workers have been with the company for ten or more years. It appears a warm and welcoming place, just like one would expect a Norwegian workplace to be. "If you are in it for the long run, you need to have strict rules and you need to help employees manage stress and the amount of stress that lingers in the office," Eldrid insists, with a wisdom born of experience. "I think people need a life. Working life is important, but it's not *everything*."

Eldrid was lucky to escape from the previous toxic working situation when she did, and she knows it. Speaking of her former boss, she wonders now if his start in the professional domain was actually not so different from her own. Did he also burst out of the gates fueled by a driving desire to prove himself and his credentials and capability? Did stress become second-nature to him? Did that same stress blind him to the stress he was causing in others? "It's easy to get used to the stress," she warns me, and for a split second, I could again see her fresh eyes go hazy in remembrance. "You get so used to it that you can't stress down. Really, you can't."

While riches have revamped the Norwegian economy and the business of oil and gas has perhaps upped the testosterone climate of the Norwegian work culture, Norwegians still have it pretty good in terms of their working environment. If some overbearing boss bites you too hard, you can nearly always opt out; Eldrid's story is certainly a testament to this. But her experience also

illustrates how the Norwegian work environment is changing, and some would argue this change is a ruthless one.

With the last of the oil money being drilled out of the Barents Sea coming not far ahead, Norway has recently focused hard on reexamining its national reputation, or *omdømme*, and the global stance it wants to establish in the post-oil era. It is prepared to launch a new identity. In fact, the government has recently toyed with updating its “Norway Pavilion” exhibit at Disney World in Orlando, Florida. That exhibit currently offers rides and entertainment that paint Norway as a land of great environmental beauty where polar bears lurk in the streets, Vikings sail its icy coastal waters, and trickster trolls are hiding in the snow-capped mountains. Over ten million visitors flock to this child-friendly spectacle each year. The cash required to renovate the exhibit is next to nothing for the Norwegian government’s coffers, so money isn’t at issue here. What’s stalling the update is indecision about what Norwegian identity to project.

No matter how its people choose to re-define their prospective “Norwegian Dream,” new socio-cultural dynamics will surface, and with every paradigm shift comes the fog that hovers over change. Until Norway discovers what exactly this identity will be, or should be, its national work environment will continue to evolve and be reconstructed, perhaps even get pushed back toward the “femininity” which long made it so congenial. It is impossible to see the end result while in the middle of such a sea change. Some questions now lingering over Norway are these: How do we want to define “hard work”? And how does a country known for its workplace flexibility go about demanding “hard work” without being excessively demanding, thereby undercutting its very goal?

“I think there are stressful times in all jobs,” Eldrid admits. “I just don’t want to walk home every day after work crying.”

We think that’s a fair request.

Notes

- 1 Eldrid is a pseudonym.
- 2 To view the most updated Working Environment Act, visit: <http://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/binfil/download2.php?tid=92156>