

# EQUALITY STRATEGY brings

Many Swedish companies are working actively towards increased equality between men and women and the benefits are appreciable. A research project in the Fiber Optic Valley innovation milieu shows equal workplaces yield a more pleasant environment, higher productivity and more balanced decisions.



**F**rom an international perspective, Sweden is at the forefront of equality. In the Sixties, the Swedes fought to get nursery places for all children and so nowadays, parental leave and good child care are universally available. This means family life and career can be combined and more women than men are going into higher education.

Despite these advances, there is still more to do for equality in Swedish working life. Research is under way in areas which include the best way to change old patterns and what equal conditions mean for growth. The Gender Network is an internationally renowned project that has been monitoring middle managers in 12 workplaces for three years. All these managers are in Fiber Optic Valley, an innovation network in Mid Sweden focusing on products and services based on fibre-optics.

“An important lesson is that it’s possible to create equal organisations, but this is a work of change which takes time. It also needs to be backed by management,” says project director Marita Svensson.

The participating managers were both men and women and their first task was to examine their own behaviour patterns. They found that they often unconsciously expected more from men and gave them more advanced duties. Another realisation was that certain jobs were regarded as “male” and others as “female” with no rational basis. These realisations led to changes, such as managers striving to recruit more women and create more mixed work teams.

“It was everyone’s view that employers do better by being more gender-aware. Mixed workgroups have a nicer atmosphere and better motivation. Also, production flows better when men as well as women can cover for each other in the event of illness,” says Svensson.

Reviewing their image of what a manager should be was a wake-up call for the project participants. There

# SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

» The gender perspective is important in our work and has been prioritised as a driver and prerequisite for growth. Active equality work opens the way for much-needed fresh thinking as well as supporting change which ultimately strengthens our competitiveness.”

*Magnus Burvall, MD Fiber Optic Valley*

is a risk that many good candidates for senior posts will be missed if a man in his forties is the yardstick.

“In the area around Fiber Optic Valley, highly educated women are clearly in the majority and it’s vital for companies to use their expertise. Also, the views of both men and women are needed on how products and services should be designed, since half the customers will be female. With no women in management, there’s a risk of missing out on crucial arguments,” says Svensson.

One of the participants in the Gender Network is production manager Bea Nordlund from Iggesund Bruk, a cellulose and cardboard factory in the forestry group. Equality issues have been a priority for the whole group for a number of years, so Nordlund made good progress in her work for change.

“The forestry industry is dominated by men and is changing a lot now. Amongst other things, there is a network of female managers,” says Nordlund.

Since she started to look at things through “gender glasses” she has been working hard to advance women in the company. One of her objectives is an equal division between men and women in workgroups and positions. Recently, two female operators were given the job of tending technically advanced machines which were previously regarded as “male” tasks.

“My advice to other managers is to consider their own actions and dare to talk about equality in the workplace. Equality brings about a significantly improved working climate as well as decisions that please both employees and owners,” says Nordlund.



## GENDER AWARENESS STRENGTHENS SOCIETY

Equality contributes to sustainable growth by bringing about a better distribution of tasks, a more multifaceted approach and thus higher quality in the development work of companies and other operations. Among other things, VINNOVA's initiatives have resulted in models for equality work and an integrated gender perspective in various fields of activity as well as in strong research and development milieus. The Gender Network project was part of a VINNOVA gender awareness research programme. Its results will be disseminated to and adopted by other organisations and have attracted international attention.