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Abstract (742 words)

This paper investigates to what extent flows of information needed for day-to-day work affect the development of interpersonal trustful relations and frontline employees' autonomy in public sector organizations. Focusing on the implementation of trust-based management in the City of Oslo, this paper analyses quantitative survey data from 1,006 municipal managers and employees and shows that flows of information needed for day-to-day work may contribute to the development of trust and enable front-line workers to make work decisions more autonomously. Moreover, this paper explores mechanisms of information flows that encourage workers to share information with each other and argues that these mechanisms promote building trustful relations and more work autonomy in practice. We also argue that these mechanisms need to be integrated into internal systems that support internal communications.

Recently, various trust-based reforms under the umbrella of trust-based management were rolled out in the Scandinavian countries with the aim to de-bureaucratize public sector organizations and empower their employees and users (Bentzen, 2019; Kivle, 2020). The reforms, that were implemented to reduce "red tape" and burdensome organizational control, also aimed at transferring more authority to make decisions related to day-to-day work to lower levels in organizational hierarchies, providing frontline workers with greater work autonomy, which in the context of public services delivery is characterized by trusting professionals to make decisions within the existing standards, policies, and rules (Evans & Hupe, 2020). Access to and sharing of information relevant for conducting the employees' work plays a significant role in supporting frontline workers ability to make decisions compliant with the existing standards when delivering public services (Evans & Hupe, 2020; Jacobides & Croson, 2001). Despite the growing body of recent empirical studies exploring trust-based reforms in the Scandinavian countries (Bentzen, 2016; Elmersjö & Sundin, 2021; Håkansson, 2022; Henriksen & Paulsen, 2021; Johnsen et al., 2022; Vallentin & Thygesen, 2017), mechanisms that enable trustful relations and frontline workers' autonomy in their professional practice still remain unclear, particularly concerning the role of information sharing.

In this paper we integrate the trust-based management perspective (Bentzen, 2019) and the perspective of organizational decision-making as information processing (Choo, 2007) and turn to theories of information sharing (Constant et al., 1994) and knowledgeable organizations (Choo, 2007) to develop a model for analyzing how frontline workers' autonomy is enabled through access to and sharing of information that help to situate day-to-day work tasks within existing policies and rules for making a decision. We tested the model using structural equation modeling (SEM) with data on how employees at lower hierarchical levels in the City of Oslo, which adopted trust-based management as main principle in its management practices in 2017, perceive reliance trust at work in conjunction with both the ability to influence professional judgments in day-to-day work and the flows of information needed in their work.

Our analysis shows that when employees have sufficient access to information needed for day-to-day work, they more easily accept to conduct their day-to-day work more autonomously from their managers and co-workers. This indicates that, through seeking self-esteem rewards of respect or power, frontline workers share information based on their experiences and insights, and—by this—expose themselves to the risk of vulnerability, which may contribute to the development of trustful relations with their co-workers and managers. We argue that managers as information intermediators can make their subordinates visible to co-workers, which has substantial impact on managers-subordinates' relations in trust-based management, and in addition, may serve as an enabling mechanism for more trustful relations and work autonomy in general. We also argue that integration of information sources and transparency of information sharing across functions may serve as an enabling factor for trust and work autonomy.

By identifying enhancing mechanisms for trust-based management, such as the visibility of information sharing and the impact of information re-distribution through managers, this paper contributes to practice by providing managers and employees better knowledge on organizational factors that facilitate more delegation of day-to-day work decision-making to employees at lower hierarchical level and more trusting relations between employees and managers. As such, this study represents one of the first attempts to unpack the mechanisms linking flows of information, trustful relations, and day-to-day work decision-making at lower hierarchical levels. This paper contributes to human resource management as well as public administration theory by analyzing mechanism in contemporary reforms in public sector organizations, which may have great value for industrial relations that benefit organizational performance as well as work autonomy and trusting relations between managers and employees.

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