

## Work Values among Swedish Male and Female Students

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## **Abstract**

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The aim was to provide an overview of the different values that make for an ideal work situation for people currently studying at different educational levels in Sweden, and between males and females (n=190). A questionnaire measuring eight Index of work values were used. Results show that social relations was the index having the highest mean rating for both males and females, followed by work and health, and working conditions. Significant difference between genders could be seen in the Index social relations, work and health, working conditions, and altruism. The single question that received the highest mean score was; to have a fair and understanding boss. The results can contribute to an understanding of how to design workplaces that attract young people and, thus, optimize well-being.

**Keywords:** attitudes, youth, work, gender, work values, social relations



## **Introduction**

Work is a central life interest for most people (MOW International Research Team, 1986). Interesting work and pay are the most important elements that individuals want from working, according to the MOW International Research Team classic text on Work Meaning Pattern, from the eighties. Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla (1993) used the expression work meaning patterns and define this as a combination of work centrality, expressive versus economic goals and entitlement opposed to norms in society. Values can vary, seen over different generations, communities, and eras (Angelöw, 2000). Values are, in this context, generalized assumptions about what is good, desirable, or right (Sverko, 1999). Sverko claims that work values, as well as other values, are generally relatively constant through people's lives. The life stages and life in general, however, change the frames of reference that affect our values (Isaksson, Johansson, Bellaagh, & Sjöberg, 2004; Sverko, 1999). Therefore it is motivated to study young males and females at different educational stages. This study was delimited to young people that had not entered working life yet. Creating workplaces that attract young people and provide good conditions for well-being and health can be an exciting challenge. A first step to approach this challenge might be to identify what young people value as important for an ideal job.

### ***Previous studies on work values, attitudes or preference***

Judge and Bretz (1992) conducted a study on a total of 67 university students, who were asked to answer questions about what they saw as important in a job. The results showed that concern for others was seen as the most important, and justice as the second most important factor. Additional factors considered important were the employee's job performance, opportunity for promotion, salary, and honesty. Hedlund, Åteg, Sconfienza, Andersson and Rosén (2003) compared students' views on ideal work with industrial labour. The results indicate that a good physical environment and a quiet, safe, and orderly workplace were most important for students. Such further aspects as having a fair and understanding boss, security of employment, and relations with work colleagues were of great importance for the students.

Bartol and Manhardt (1979) conducted a study over a nine-year period, in which they examined graduate students' work preferences. These preferences were rested on three

dimensions: (1) career, (2) working environment and social relations, and (3) positive intrinsic phenomena of a human being, they found that business people felt career to be more important than social scientists did, while working environment and social relations, as well as positive internal feelings, were estimated to be of greater importance to social scientists than business people (Bartol & Manhardt, 1979). These are interesting results; however, the study was conducted some decades ago. Martin and Kirkcaldy (1998) studied 50 male and 50 female university students. The aim of the study was to investigate work-related attitudes. The results showed that men were more competitive and valued money more than women, who, in turn, saw work ethic as the most important aspect of work (Martin & Kirkcaldy, 1998). Lips (1992) showed in a study of 253 female and 235 male university students that men and women had different work values. The female students valued relationships with other people at work and emphasized the importance of enjoyment of work. Both gender, but especially male students, perceived that a career in science is demanding, and the willingness to attend such courses was seen as positive (Lips, 1992). Johnson (2001) found that male and female students job values become more alike each other during the transition from students to young adult worker. Having a quality life and the opportunity to express oneself and to gain intellectual satisfaction are values that have stronger roots among the younger generation than the older. In the older generation, more materialistic values, such as economic growth, law and order, and security, tend to be more important (Inglehart, 1990). Material values seem to be more important for older generations, while post-material values are more important for younger generations (Swedish National Board for Youth Affairs, 2007). People with material values appreciate aspects as good pay, collectivism, and high security, while those with post-material values rate interesting work, freedom, and individualism more highly. Young people's values may already have adapted to a post-industrial society, characterized by knowledge, skills, creativity, communication, and culture. Sinisalo (2004), in the years 1977, 1989, and 1995, studied 15- to 16-year-olds in Finland in order to detect differences in work values between genders. Values relating to self-fulfilment scored higher towards the end of the period. The boys put greater emphasis on external rewards like money, while the girls found occupational health and internal factors to be important. The differences between boys and girls became clearer at the end of the

period (Sinisalo, 2004). Duff and Sedlacek (2007) conducted a study on a total of 31731 college students between 1995 and 2004. The results revealed that men placed greater emphasis on making money, while women gave more weight to working with people and contributing to society. Over a ten-year period the outcome changed. Factors *be able to influence their work* and *have stimulating work* increased by 10%, while the factors *make money* and *have a prestigious job* decreased by 5% (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007).

Gamberale, Bracken, and Mardones (1995) examined on two occasions the stability of work-related values of 2349 students aged 17 to 21 years in Sweden. The goal that students saw as most important was to have an interesting job. Ranked second was to have friendly colleagues; third and fourth were having a work that is appreciated by others and a good working environment. The results of an open question revealed that 20% of men and 10% of women saw salary as the most important aspect of work, while about 15% of both women and men answered that the social working environment, that is, relations with colleagues, was most important. About 10% of both gender stated that they regard working environment as the most important thing at work. A study conducted among high school students in the United States showed, unlike many other studies, no differences between the gender with respect to how important they consider external rewards in the work, such as high salary. The study revealed that young women attach more importance to internal, unselfish, and social rewards than young men do (Marini, 1996). In a study at Zagreb University, Sverko (1999) compared differences in values among 169 first-year social work students with those of other students and found personal development to be most important. The aspect of work deemed second most important, in both the group who studied social work and the control group, was to be able to use acquired knowledge. Among the students who studied social work, altruism ranked in third place; among the students in the control group, it was in 14th place. Hagström and Kjellberg (2007) examined gender-related changes in existing labour values, taking three measurements over a 4.5-year period. The professionals who participated in the study were 221 nurses and 384 engineers, both gender-dominant professions. Social relationships appeared to be most important for women, while benefits, power, and career showed high mean value among men. At all measurements, social relations clearly were more important for women than for men.

Altruism was measured to be more important for nurses, but the female nurses were the group who saw it as most important. The importance of altruism, however, declined over time in all groups, except in the male engineers, where it was constant.

In a survey conducted by Fouad, Kantamneni, Smothers, Chen, Fitzpatrick, and Terry (2008), 5 of 12 participants answered that an unselfish desire to help others had influenced their career choice. People who were studying social work came to value altruism significantly higher than subjects in the control group. In a U.S. study by Hyde and Weathington (2006), the focus was on trying to find out how peoples' values about their private lives aligned with their attitudes at work. The main variables were scores on work, family, religion, and privacy. The results showed that aspects of life, other than work, play a clear role in the attitudes of people towards their work (Hyde & Weathington, 2006). In another study on values, about 500 workers in the United Kingdom and Greece were surveyed. Results showed that personality traits, age, and gender can explain variations in work values. They also found that there is clear correlation between certain personality traits and certain work values (Furnham, Petrides, Tsaousis, Pappas, & Garrod, 2005). Between the years 1973 and 1990, Rowe and Snizek (1995) conducted a study of 7,436 full-time working women and men from different professions. The study aimed to investigate relationship between gender and work values, but found no connection between them. Instead, the results indicate that factors such as age, education, and influence at work are relevant to a person's work values.

This study is based on previous studies on work values conducted in Sweden (see method), but work values has in this study been extended to even incorporate values on work and health since that lack in previous research, as illustrated in the examples above. It also survey work values among students at different educational levels, instead of students at the same level as been done in most previous studies on values. This study investigated what work values students emphasize as important for an ideal work situation. The aim was to provide an overview of different values of an ideal job for people studying at different educational levels, and between males and females. The aim was to investigate if there were differences in values for ideal work between male and female students who have reached different stages in their education.

## **Data and Methods**

### ***Participants***

The study focused on (I) students about 15 years old attending ninth grade, which is the last year in secondary school (n=65), (II) students about 18 year old in their last (third) year in upper secondary school (n=65), and (III) students in higher education who have studied at university for at least three semesters (n=60). The decision was made to obtain responses from at least 30 subjects of each gender from each of the three educational groups to include the possibility that attitudes and values might develop and change in people between the years when they are 15 years old and the time when they have reached a higher age and educational level. A total of 190 subjects participated in the survey, which included 95 males and 95 females. The schools contacted represented a large proportion of the population, with students from widely different geographical areas and socioeconomic backgrounds, in order to avoid biases that individuals from similar backgrounds could have similar values in certain aspects. Data were collected in 2008.

The principals of two secondary schools in a mid-sized town in Sweden were requested to allow time of ninth graders' lessons for the data collection. The first secondary school was located near the town centre. The other secondary school was located in a suburban area of the town. An assistant from each school decided which classes would participate in the survey, at the moment we randomly visited the school. Questionnaires were distributed in the classroom.

In the group of upper secondary school students, youth from five different upper secondary schools in a county in mid-Sweden participated. Those upper secondary schools represent a broad variety of profiles for upper secondary schools in Sweden. For instance, one school collaborates with a large corporation in the county, and another emphasises liberal arts. Some of the students in this group had a mandatory visit to a Swedish university, and answered the questionnaire at that time. For further data collection, an upper secondary school with a wide range of educational programmes was visited. As in the collection of compulsory secondary school data, the principal gave permission to cancel a lesson to conduct the survey.

Data was also gathered from some students in the cafeteria and other public places at the school. Since only final-year students were asked participate, it was ascertained that they were in the correct age grade before administering the questionnaire. The proportion of men and women who were asked was adapted to provide at least 30 responses from each gender.

At one mid-sized university in Sweden, during one week, students in public places at different departments of the university were asked if they had studied at the university for at least three semesters, and if they wanted to participate in the survey. Participants were selected to achieve distribution among students in different courses. To avoid choice of education and future work biases, we obtained a spread of male and female students from courses in the university's departments of economics, humanities, natural science, education and psychology, engineering and construction, and care and sociology.

### ***Questionnaire and Index***

Detailed descriptions of the development of the original questionnaire are to be found in Hagström, Gamberale and Sconfienza (1996), and empirical results based on the questionnaire are to be found in (Hagström & Kjellberg, 2007). The questionnaire was also used in Åteg's (2006) study on activities and learning for attractive work.

In present study the questionnaire were further developed to include questions on work and health. One reason for this was that an increasing interest on relations between health and work have evoked in the public debate the latest decade, as shown in for instance EU directives on work environment. The survey consist questions formulated as statements that describe different values about ideal work. Eight indices of work values were measured, henceforth called index. It measures index of work values on a five-point scale, ranging from *of no importance at all* to *absolutely necessary*, all steps had verbal labels. Each index consists of four questions. To test for internal consistency and reliability a Cronbach Alpha was conducted, all index scored over 0.7. Index (1) *work and health* ( $\alpha=0.73$ ) include questions about the working environment e.g. health effects or if there is good ergonomic equipment at work. Index (2) *work conditions* ( $\alpha=0.74$ ) include aspects of materials and security e.g. that the work are safe and well-organized. Index (3) *social relations* ( $\alpha=0.73$ ) includes having the opportunity to

work in a good coherent team, having nice colleagues and an understanding boss, and being appreciated by directors and co-workers. Index (4) *self-realization* ( $\alpha=0.74$ ) consist questions about e.g. ability to develop ones personality, use creativity, fantasy and meaningfulness. Index (5) *altruism* ( $\alpha=0.77$ ) incorporate questions reflecting the usefulness of the work for society or to other people e.g. the work is useful for society. Index (6) *benefits/career* ( $\alpha=0.77$ ) include questions on possibilities to advance, and importance of high salary or status e.g. I get high wages and other tangible benefits. Index (7) *influence* ( $\alpha=0.76$ ) questions in this index reflect how important it is perceived to make important decisions, have impact and be in a leading position. Index (8) *independence* ( $\alpha=0.77$ ) dealing with questions about e.g. independently take care of or decide about ones work tasks.

Finally, in the questionnaire they answered if they were male or female, and could add a comment about anything else they thought was important for ideal work.

### ***Statistical Analysis***

In the analysis phase, the questions were divided into the eight different groups (the index presented above). The non-parametric one way of analysis-test Kruskal-Wallis was conducted in order to test equality of medians in the eight index of work values, among the gender- and educational groups. T-test was conducted to compare means for two groups of cases and verify results from the Kruskal-Wallis-test e.g. each index separately among males and females. The reason for conduction statistical analysis based on both median and mean were to, initially in the analyses, verify if attitudes on group levels differences depending on how the VAS-scale were summarized. This in turn was done in order to meet the prevailing debate on whether VAS-scale data on attitudes should be defined as ordinal or interval data. In tables 1 and 2,  $p$ -values presented are based on Kruskal-Wallis-test. Significance level was set to  $p=.05$ . Normal distribution was verified by a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. Data were analyzed with the statistical package SPSS 18.0.

## Results

### *Work Values among Male and Female Students*

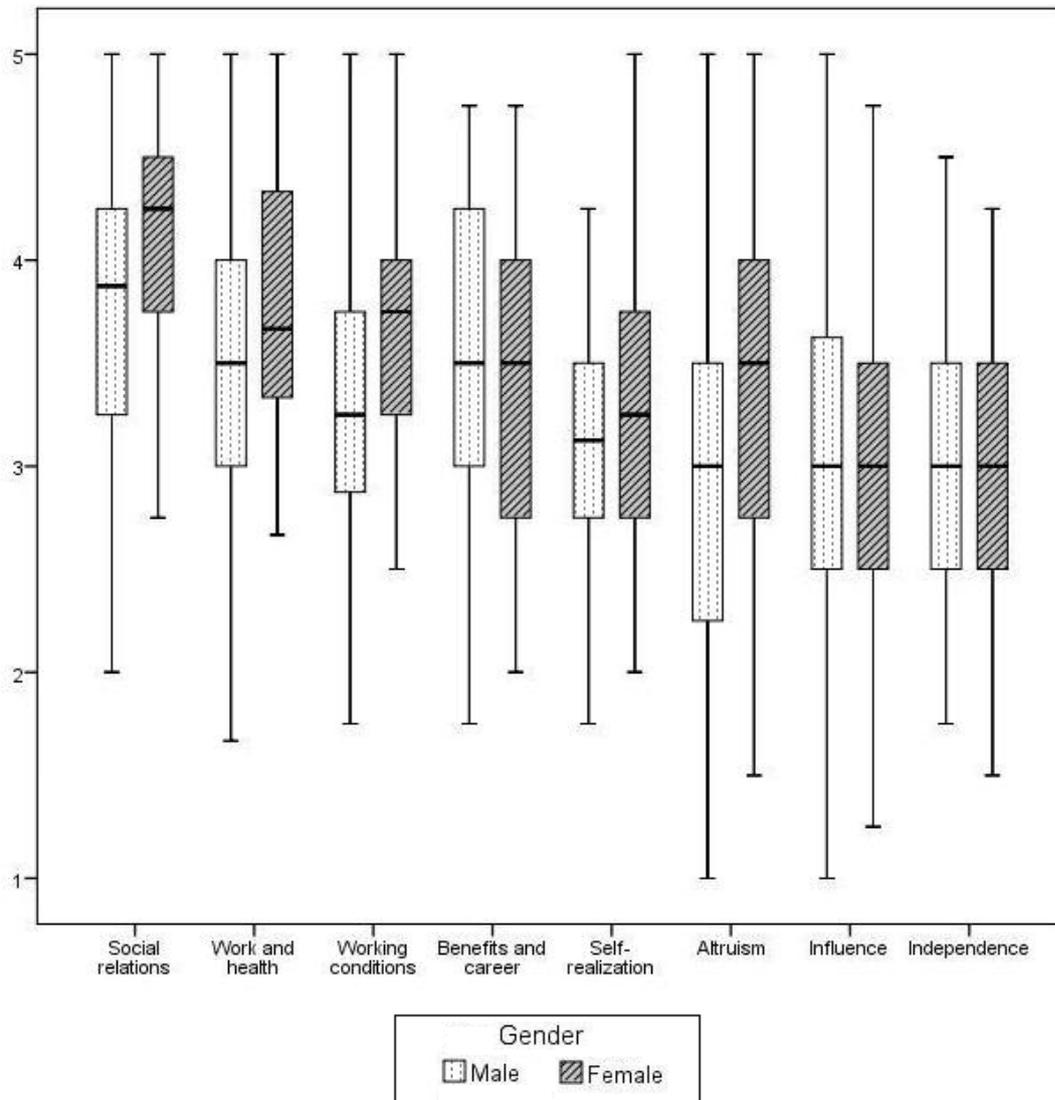
The study showed that the index social relations ranked the highest mean score ( $\bar{x}=3.97$ ), followed by work and health ( $\bar{x}=3.68$ ) and working conditions ( $\bar{x}=3.52$ ). Significant difference between the genders could be seen in the indexes social relations ( $p=.01$ ), work and health ( $p=.01$ ), working conditions ( $p=.01$ ), and altruism ( $p=.01$ ). Females valued those indexes higher than males did (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Work Values Index, comparing Male and Female Students (n = 190)

	Female			Male			<i>p</i> -for Gender
	Mean	SD	Median	Mean	SD	Median	
Social relations	4.1	-0.53	4.25	3.84	-0.63	4	0.01**
Work and health	3.83	-0.64	3.67	3.54	-0.81	3.33	0.01**
Working conditions	3.71	-0.56	3.75	3.34	-0.72	3.25	0.01**
Benefits and career	3.39	-0.67	3.5	3.49	-0.74	3.5	0.28
Self-realization	3.34	-0.71	3.25	3.14	-0.67	3	0.10
Altruism	3.35	-0.77	3.5	2.98	-0.92	3	0.01**
Influence	3.1	-0.6	3	3.12	-0.73	3	0.55
Independence	2.99	-0.57	3	3.01	-0.71	3	0.95

Note: \*\*= Significance

In figure 1 the spread of answers in gender groups are illustrated.



**Figure 1.** Work Values Index comparison of Male and Females student regarding ideal work values (n=190)

Females regard questions about environmentally friendly work ( $p=.001$ ), physical environment ( $p=.001$ ), health effects ( $p=.02$ ), to manage oneself work ( $p=.001$ ), social interaction ( $p=.001$ ), appreciation ( $p=.02$ ) and meaningfulness ( $p=0.001$ ) as significantly more important than do males.

Results show that the three questions that got the highest mean scores for males were;

*to have a fair and understanding boss ( $\bar{x}$  =4.05)*

*having a job where you have many nice colleagues ( $\bar{x}$  =4.01)*

*to feel appreciated by both the director and co-workers ( $\bar{x}$  =3.99)*

Highest mean scores for females were the questions;

*to have a fair and understanding boss ( $\bar{x}$  =4.26)*

*to feel appreciated by both the director and co-workers ( $\bar{x}$  =4.24)*

*to have a secure job with regular income ( $\bar{x}$  =4.19)*

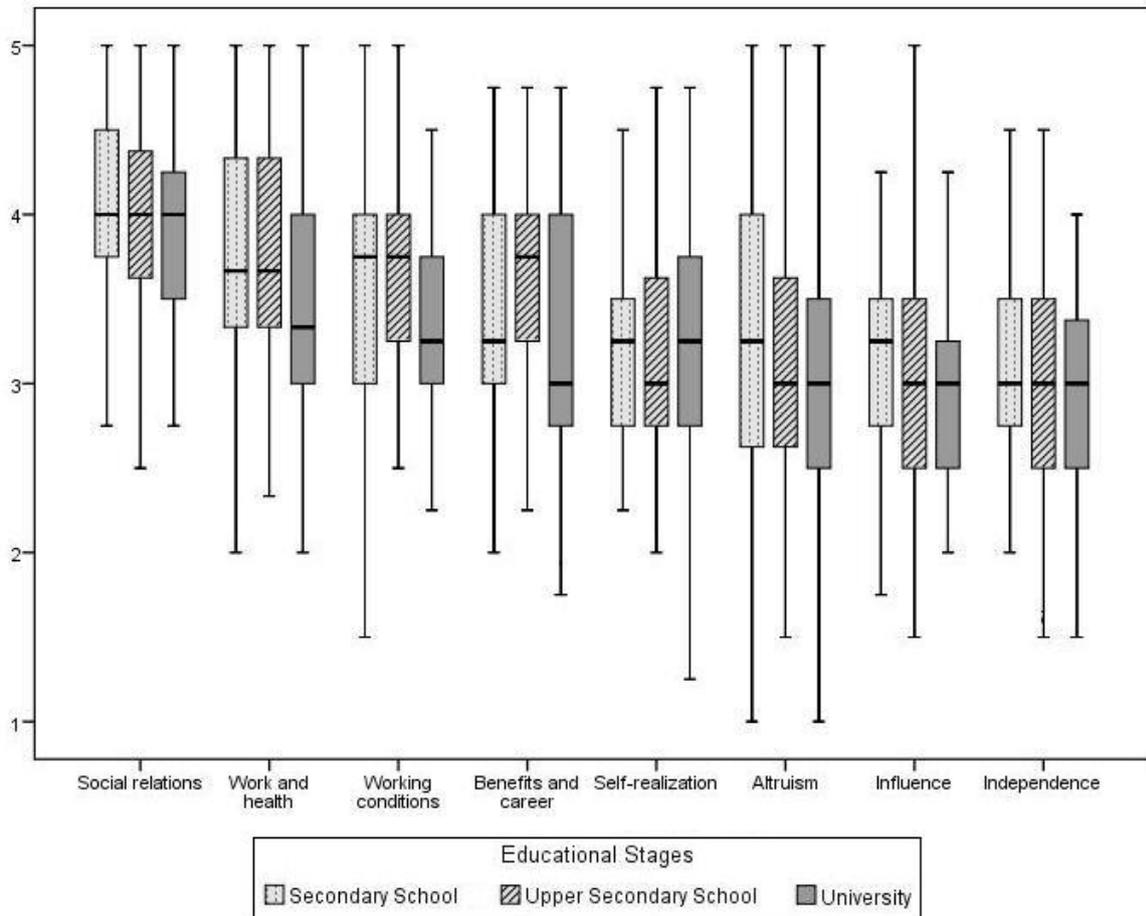
### ***Work Values among Students at different Stages in their Education***

Regarding differences in work values related to educational levels, there was no significance to deduce for the eight indexes.

**Table 2.** Ideal Work Index Comparing Students who have reached different stages in their education (n = 190)

	Mean		Mean university students	Median total	SD total	<i>p</i> - for Educational level
	Mean Secondary school students	Upper secondary school students				
Social relations	3.97	3.98	3.94	4	0.6	0.92
Work and health	3.72	3.78	3.55	3.67	-0.74	0.22
Working conditions	3.57	3.61	3.38	3.5	-0.67	0.12
Benefits and career	3.45	3.58	3.29	3.5	-0.7	0.07
Self-realization	3.29	3.21	3.25	3.25	-0.7	0.77
Altruism	3.31	3.11	3.1	3.25	-0.87	0.27
Influence	3.18	3.07	3.01	3	-0.67	0.38
Independence	3.14	2.99	2.89	3	-0.64	0.12

Note: No significant differences regarding work values index and educational level. The difference was considered to be statistically significant when  $p < 0.05$ .



**Figure 2.** Work Values Index comparing students who have reached different stages in their education (n = 190)

The questions on work values that were rated highest (highest mean scores) by students are illustrated in table 3. There were no significant differences between the groups of students at different educational levels regarding those questions.

**Table 3.** Work Values questions rated highest (n= 190)

	Mean	Mean	Upper
	Secondary	secondary	Mean
	school	school	University
	students	students	students
<i>to have a fair and understanding boss</i>	4.26	4.15	4.07
<i>to feel appreciated by both the director and co-workers</i>	4.18	4.09	4.01
<i>to have a job where you have many nice colleagues</i>	4.14	4.10	4.02
<i>to have a secure job with regular income</i>	4.08	4.09	4.05

Taking each question separately there were although some differences in values in the different educational level groups. The possibility for advancement at work ( $p=.01$ ), to show others that I'm good at work ( $p=.03$ ), that work is environmental friendly ( $p=.02$ ) and to work devoted ( $p=.03$ ) was valued highest by upper secondary school students. To manage the work without interference by others ( $p=.04$ ) to contribute to a human world ( $p=0.01$ ) was valued highest by secondary school students. To conduct work without taking responsible for others and the possibility that work contribute to a high social position was valued similar by secondary- and upper secondary school students but valued significant less by university students ( $p=.02$ ). To work in a well-coherent team was valued highest by university students ( $p=.04$ )

## Discussion

It is interesting to note that there are significant gender differences in median and mean scores of certain index. One may reflect on the possibility of creating work tasks and workplaces based on the understanding of gender differences in values that contribute to ideal jobs, in order to attract certain target groups. This can be valuable knowledge if one wishes to attract men to female-dominated occupations or vice versa.

This study has shown that, in this cohort, issues of social relations received the most positive average mean and median response among both gender. What we can learn from this is that workplaces that ought to attract a young workforce should be designed to optimize a pleasant environment for social contacts. Further, support and encouragement from staff and managers are of great importance to this population. This result is consistent with previous studies in Sweden among other cohorts (eg. Hagström & Kjellberg, 2007; Hedlund, et al., 2003), and the results of Gamberale et al. (1995), in which friendly colleagues were regarded as an important element of the workplace. Work and health and working conditions are the indexes that had the second and third highest mean rate. This also compares with the results of studies by Gamberale et al. (1995) and Hedlund et al. (2003). Ideal work for young people includes, according to present results, both fair and empathic managers and good working conditions for health at work. Employee independence and ability to influence might be less important aspects to consider in creating an ideal workplace for young people.

This was a survey with a cross-sectional design showing values of different educational and gender groups at the time at which the survey was conducted. Alternatively, one could have followed the same group through three different educational levels; however, that would instead show whether attitudes and values changes over time and educational spans, rather than a picture of values among young people. Nevertheless, that would be interesting to study in the future. One could also have compared scores of different professions. However, we already have this information from some of the previous studies (Hagström & Kjellberg, 2007; Hedlund, et al., 2003). An updated comparison of values among people in different countries would be an interesting further study to conduct, as MOW International Research Team (1986) did in the 80s.

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