

Coping with Economic Recession - The Negotiation Skills of Shop Stewards

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ABSTRACT

The financial crisis has changed the cooperative culture in many companies. While the shop stewards only a few years ago negotiated wages increases and how to deal with labour shortage, they often have to negotiate wages cuts and redundancies today. Based on a quantitative survey with 3,275 Danish shop stewards employed in the private sector anno 2010, this paper examines whether shop stewards after more than 10 years of economic growth has the skills to negotiate wage and working conditions during the crisis. The analysis shows that while in general a cooperative approach is quite widespread in Danish companies, companies hit by the crises tend to give less influence to shop stewards and employees, especially with respect to economic and strategic issues. Also, more than one in four shop stewards reports that they lack the skills to negotiate wage cuts and redundancies. However, shop stewards' seniority and formal shop steward qualifications do appear to make a difference, where the more experienced shop stewards and those with formal training are more likely to be involved managerial decisions.

Keywords: Shop steward, financial crises, negotiating skills, survey, Denmark.

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The Shop Steward Survey 2010 was financed by the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions. Besides data from 7,877 shop stewards (private and public sector combined), this project also included a survey with 3,117 health & safety representatives, 1,475 workers, 1,618 managers and 225 local union representatives.

Introduction:

The economic situation has recently changed from a period of economic prosperity to an economic slowdown or even crisis in most countries worldwide. Across the world, companies are challenged by the crisis, and especially in labour market systems with strong traditions of collective bargaining are shop stewards met with demands from management and colleagues that differ significantly from the demands just a few years ago. Denmark is no exception. The country went through an unprecedented period of economic prosperity for more than a decade. However, since 2009, mass redundancies, economic recession, wage freezes and cutbacks have to varying degrees replaced the challenges of labour shortage and low unemployment rates which dominated the Danish labour market from the late 1990's and up until Autumn 2008 (Eurofound, 2009). This recent economic

development has to some degree challenged the skills of shop stewards and unions alike, as different strategies and competencies are needed when negotiating during such distinct economic cycles (Rychly, 2009: 25).

This paper examines and compares the negotiation skills of Danish shop stewards during the crises. We analyse three types of companies; companies highly affected, less affected and not affected by the economic crisis with a focus on how shop stewards handle different economic situations at the workplace. In doing so, we explore the relations between management and shop stewards, how they have discussed the economic crisis at the workplace and shop stewards' involvement in developing company based responses to the crisis. Such an analysis will not only shed light on shop stewards' competencies and ability to adjust to different economic cycles when negotiating locally with management. It will also give an indication of the flexibility and implicitly sustainability of industrial relation systems based on collective bargaining like the Danish. In Denmark, the institutional framework for regulating wages and working conditions is primarily a series of collective agreements signed by social partners at sectoral and company levels, respectively. The sectoral agreements negotiated by employers' organisations and trade unions give significant latitude to social partners at company level to bargain wages and working conditions. In fact, Denmark is often considered the prototype of organised decentralisation with its comparatively high union density, extensive collective agreement coverage and strong union representation at the workplace, where the bargaining structures and negotiation culture at sectoral level to a large degree have been replicated at company level (Traxler, 1995; Due and Madsen, 2006). Due to this structure, shop stewards and particularly their bargaining competencies represent the backbone of the Danish collective bargaining system. Their ability to be a strong counterpart by having the needed skills to negotiate locally with management is indeed a precondition for the Danish bargaining system, especially as negotiations increasingly are decentralised towards the company level.

In the paper, we will test the following hypothesis stating that 'shop stewards often lack the experience and skills (defined as formal shop steward qualification and practical experience in terms of seniority) to negotiate during the recent economic crisis. Indeed, recent empirical findings reveal that trade unions and their representatives typically struggle to match the demands of management when negotiating at enterprise level due to recent economic changes (Eurofound, 2009). This could be down to shop stewards' lack of experience and to some degree negotiation skills to bargain during a recession. If we look exclusively at Denmark, many shop stewards have never had to negotiate during periods of economic recession. They have typically been elected shop stewards prior to the economic crisis and many have on average up to six years experience as shop stewards (Larsen et al, 2010). Their experiences in company based negotiations cover therefore mainly periods of economic prosperity which require very different competencies and strategies.

In the following, the main features of the Danish bargaining model and the role of shop stewards are first presented. We then briefly review contemporary literature on the economic crisis and the roles of shop stewards before presenting the empirical material and the methods used. Afterwards we analyse the impact of the economic crisis on local bargaining in private companies, as the private sector has been hit particularly hard by the recession (Ibsen et al, 2011). In doing so, we draw on a large scale quantitative survey with 3.275 randomly selected shop stewards employed in the private sector and members of the Danish Confederation of Unions (LO) conducted in 2010.

1.1 The Danish Bargaining Model and the Shop Steward

The Danish labour market model is often classified as a collective agreement model, where the labour market is primarily regulated through collective agreements signed by the social partners. The union density is high, and the industrial relations (IR) system is dominated by a high degree of voluntarism, where trade unions and employers through collective agreements find solutions to various challenges. The social partners are also involved in the policy-making process when the government proposes new legislation. Indeed wage and working conditions are primarily left to social partners, although legislation also dominates in areas such as vacation time, health and safety. Therefore, the labour market regulation is not entirely left to social partners. Instead, a close collaboration and coordination takes place between the state, unions and employers associations to avoid government led initiatives clashing with the agreements signed by social partners. As such, relations between the parties are based on consensus and the premise of mutual respect for their diverging interests (Due and Madsen, 2008: 517). The parties only have the right to engage in disputes at the time when a negotiation concerning the conclusion and renewal of agreements takes place. During the settlement period, there is no resort to industrial action; the so-called 'peace obligation' even if company based bargaining typically takes place after the peace obligation has come into force (Due and Madsen, 2008: 518).

During the last few decades, a decentralisation process has taken place within the Danish industrial relations systems. The framework for collective bargaining is still outlined by sector agreements, whilst local bargaining increasingly determines the implementation and interpretation of these agreements at company level due to pressures for decentralisation. Due and Madsen (2006) describe this process as centralised decentralisation, whilst other commentators draw on the concepts of coordinated or organised decentralisation (Ferner and Hyman 1992; Traxler 1995). The main difference between organised decentralisation and dis-organised decentralisation is that no coordination takes place between the state and social partners in the case of the latter and there is no local reproduction of the central bargaining structure. Some commentators also define this difference as the domination of liberal market economy rather than a coordinated market economy (Hall and Soskice, 2001).

A precondition for the strength of such an IR-model as the Danish is a high *coverage of agreements*. Overall, 75 per cent of the Danish labour market was covered by collective agreements in 2010 – compared to 80 per cent in 2007 and 84 per cent in 1997 (Larsen et al, 2010; Due et al., 2010). However, the coverage rate varies considerably between the public and the private sector with full coverage in the public sector compared to 71 per cent in the private sector (Larsen et al, 2010). The spill-over to sectors not covered by collective agreements is considerable, and effectively most of the rules defined in the collective agreements apply for the non-covered part of the labour market with a few exceptions.

The shop steward is an important navel in the machinery of collective bargaining, especially since the process of decentralization. The shop steward is a watch dog and a negotiator at company level. He or she assures the implementation and the fulfilment of the collective agreements at enterprise level and conclude local agreements that take local needs into account. In many ways, the bargaining structure from the central level has to be reproduced on the local level between skilled partners – or else the centralized decentralization becomes disorganized decentralization. Hence, if the potentials of the system of centralized decentralized collective bargaining are to be used locally,

two preconditions have to be in place: (a) the work place has to have a shop steward and (b) the shop steward has to have the skills to negotiate local agreements.

The *shop steward coverage* is difficult to measure. Asking some 1600 managers from randomly selected workplaces according to size and sector, the result is that on average 52 per cent of Danish work places has a shop steward. Considerable differences exist between private (33 per cent) and public (91 per cent) sector. Size plays a major part here; the larger, the higher probability that the enterprise has a shop steward. Among work places with 5-9 employees, some 35 per cent has a shop steward, while the share is 91 per cent in enterprises employing 100-249 employees (Larsen et al. 2010: 245-52). However, it has to be kept in mind that the presence of a shop steward is closely linked to the presence of a collective agreement; if there is a shop steward, very often there is a collective agreement and vice versa.

Without the support of members, the collective agreements will have limited legitimacy. Hence, the *union coverage* is of importance. In 1995, some 73 per cent of employees on the Danish labour market were members of a union, a number that had declined to 67 per cent in 2010 (Due et al, 2010; Ibsen et al, 2011a).¹ While the decline is less pronounced as in many other European countries, this recent trend does challenge the unions as well as the collective bargaining system. However, the vast majority of employers and their organizations support the collective bargaining system as an institution that secures industrial peace for two to four years at a time.

2.1 Negotiating during recession – A brief literature review

The on-going economic recession has been subject to increased research in recent years. A number of studies have examined the strategies employed and compromises reached by trade unions, employers and national governments as responses to the economic crisis. However, focus has primarily been on the tripartite negotiations between social partners and national governments along with the collective bargaining process and the social pacts concluded at confederal and sectoral levels, respectively (Glasner et al, 2010; Ibsen et al, 2011b; McDonough and Dundon, 2010; De Pas Campos Lima and Artiles, 2011). Research on company based responses to the crisis and particularly the involvement of shop stewards in developing such initiatives along with their negotiation skills are rarely the main analytical focus. Hence, in countries where bargaining powers increasingly are decentralised towards company level, the shop stewards' ability and competencies to adjust to different economic cycles can be considered the ultimate litmus test regarding the flexibility and sustainability of industrial relations systems based on collective bargaining. In such countries, the bargaining system rely to a large extent on social partners locally to develop responses to the crisis and in particular that shop stewards act as a strong counterpart - able to ensure that also the interests of labour are reflected in the company based solutions.

The few studies on company based responses to the crisis typically concentrate on the type of local agreements, including the trade-offs involved for employees and management alike (Cawley and Marginson, 2010, Ibsen, 2011; Rychley, 2009: 23). They reveal that the negotiated compromises in European companies often involve wage concessions, wage freezes and reduced working hours to temporary safeguard jobs and allow financial cutbacks – trade offs that rarely are found or even imagined in periods of economic stability and growth (Rychley, 2009: 25; Ibsen, 2011: 60; Glassner

¹ Different accounts estimates the union coverage differently, but the differences are not considerable. See Due et al, 2010; DA 2009; Ibsen 2000; Scheuer 1996.

et al, 2011: 317; Carley and Marginson, 2010). These studies also give a glimpse of unions and shop stewards' involvement in developing these local initiatives across Europe. Glassner et. al (2011: 317) find that company based agreements are less widespread in countries dominated by single-employer arrangements than multi-employer bargaining, indicating that the institutional framework for regulating wages and working conditions to varying degrees embrace the involvement of unions and shops stewards at company level. Other research reveals that the threat and/or use of industrial actions by unions and shop stewards have prevented company closure, wage cutbacks, and allowed some degree of compensation for working time reductions (Glassner and Keune, 2010; Kretsos, 2011: 278-80). Other studies conclude that companies, unions and shop stewards have without relying on industrial action opposed wage concessions and lay offs with some success, even if their bargaining position can be considered weakened in times of crisis due to the lack of demand for labour (Ibsen et al, 2011b: 329; Ibsen, 2011: 59; Lehdorff, 2011: 350). Such studies imply that unions and shop stewards adopt different strategies to influence company based decisions. Some shop stewards employ a more militant approach by relying on means of industrial actions, whilst others pursue a more collaborative approach – findings which past research on the roles of shop stewards in the changing economic cycles of the 1980's and early 1990's confirm (Pilemalm et al, 2001: 573; Rigby and Smith, 1999). However, whilst these studies offer some insights into the role of shop stewards at company level, they seldom give a detailed account of the shop stewards' roles in developing the various company responses to the recent economic crisis. Likewise, such research rarely explore the potential link between shop stewards bargaining powers and thereby implicit level of influence vis-a-vis their negotiations skills in terms of formal shop steward qualifications and practical experience as shop steward.

In this paper, we will explore the potential link between shop stewards involvement in company based responses and their negotiation skills. We will assume that that the more experienced shop steward and those with formal shop steward qualifications tend to be more actively engaged in company based responses in terms of discussing the crisis at the shop floor, take part in the strategic and economic decisions, wage bargaining and the process of laying off staff. Their less experienced colleagues and those without formal shop steward training are more likely not to be involved in such responses. Such an analysis will enable us to test the hypothesis outlined in the beginning of the paper namely that 'shop stewards often lack the experience and skills to negotiate during the recent economic crisis. In the following we first present the used methods and data-sets before moving on to analyse the impact of the economic crisis on local bargaining at enterprise level.

3.1 Method and Data set used

This paper draws on data from a large scale quantitative survey with 7,877 Danish shop stewards in the public and private sector, conducted in early 2010. The data used in this analysis is from the private sector only and involve 3,275 shop stewards. The survey data was collected through a questionnaire including 300 questions. The questions were developed over three months in close cooperation with union representatives from unions under the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions and covered the following areas:

- Background information (gender, age, education, union affiliation, sector, size, ownership, seniority as shop steward, family relations)
- Relations to colleagues (union membership, cooperation and conflict, issues discussed with colleagues)
- Relations to management (co-influence, information, management prerogative, issues discussed with management, type of relation)

- Relations to union (contact form and frequency, issues discussed with union, satisfaction with the service provided by the union)
- Local negotiations (issues in local negotiations, coverage of agreements, relationship between local agreements and framework agreements)
- Shop stewards roles & assignments (time spend on shop steward work, issues of most importance in the work, network, working conditions as shop steward)
- Education & competences (the level and effect of shop steward education, type of education, need for further education,)
- Motivation for the job (why become a shop steward, motivation for staying or leaving the job, career aspirations).

The questionnaire was tested in several pilot tests with shop stewards and health and safety representatives.

26,295 questionnaires were sent out to all registered shop stewards and health & safety (H&S) representatives within the Danish Confederation of Trade Unions except for one union. For this union, a sample was made. The contact data was obtained through each union under the Confederation. 18,917 invitations were sent by e-mail while 7,378 were sent by traditional mail. This was based on an evaluation by each union of the level of IT-skills an IT-access among their representatives. However, no matter if the respondent got a letter or an e-mail the questionnaire had to be filled out on the internet. Enclosed in the e-mail or letter was a recommendation from each unions president to participate in the survey. Two to three reminders were send out within a month and for unions with a particular low response rate, telephone interviews were carried out.

The questionnaire to shop stewards and to H&S representatives was different as their tasks are quite distinct. Depending on whether the respondent was a shop steward or an H&S representative (the first question asked), the person was led on to the relevant questionnaire. After cleaning the data for individuals who were neither shop stewards nor H&S representatives, the final response rate was 48 per cent for shop stewards (N=7,877) and 41 per cent for H&S representatives (N=3,117). This analysis only draws on the shop steward data set. A response rate of 48 per cent can be considered satisfactory due to the type of questionnaire and not least the length of the questionnaire taken in consideration. The response analysis did not show any sign of misrepresentation regarding gender and age. This was tested for the 12 out of the 15 unions that delivered background information regarding gender and age. The sample is representative regarding these variables.

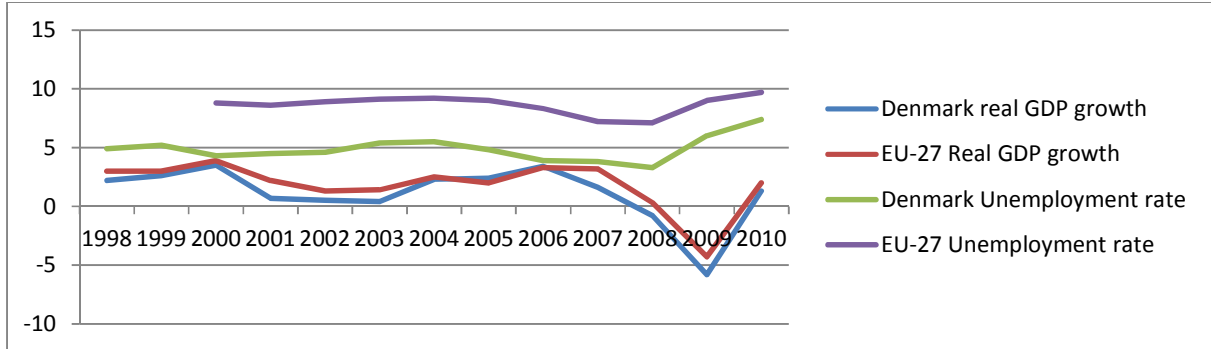
All data has been weighted as some unions have a large shop stewards/member ratio, while other has a smaller ratio. If the data was not weighted, a union with high 'shop steward density' would have a stronger voice than a union with low 'shop steward density' even though the latter had a, say, three times bigger membership base. To even out this bias, the unions have been weighed between 0.26 and 3.44 reflecting the member ship base on the time of the data collection.

In the following, the empirical analysis draws on this data-set to explore the economic situation in Danish companies, how the crisis has been discussed, its impact on workplace relations along with the influence of shop stewards on the strategic and economic decisions within the company, local wage bargaining and dismissals.

4.1 The Economic Situation anno 2010

The economic crisis continues to rage across Europe and escalating unemployment rates, declining GDP, mass redundancies along with cutbacks in wages have to varying degrees replaced the period of economic growth that dominated most European countries from the late 1990s and up until 2008. In Denmark, the economic slowdown started already in late 2007, but the blow to the economy became first apparent in 2009 with real GDP growth rate declining from 1,6 per cent in 2007 to -5,8 per cent in 2009 alongside a rapid increasing unemployment rate (Ibsen, 2011; see figure 1).

Figure 1: GDP growth rates and unemployment rates before and during the crisis in per cent (1998-2010)



Source: Eurostat (2012a;b)

The unemployment rate more than doubled in Denmark between 2008 and 2010 and increased thereby more rapidly than the general EU-average, even if the percentage of unemployed continues to be lower than the EU-average. Likewise, the economy in terms of real GDP growth rate also fared considerably better in 2007 compared to 2010, and suggests - along with the escalating unemployment rate - that the Danish economy faces a period of recession anno 2010 compared to previous years.

The recent blow to the economy has affected most sectors one way or the another. However, it is particularly the private sector that has been hit hard with a considerably higher number of shop stewards reporting that their workplace has been affected by redundancies, wage freezes and reductions as well as threats of closing down the company. Differences are less pronounced in the areas of financial cutbacks, outsourcing of services and production, merging of workplaces and stopping recruitment (see table 1).

Table 1: Effects of the crisis in the Danish workplace 2010 (Within the last year, has your workplace experienced one or more of the following...?) in per cent

	Private sector	Public sector
Redundancies	68	26
Wage freeze	32	4
Wage cutting	8	1
Threat of closure	9	5
Expansion of the workforce	20	21
Recruitment stop for new personnel	40	44

Financial cutbacks	66	70
Restructuring of the company	48	52
Company merger	13	19
Outsourcing	18	10
None of the above	6	10

n=7876

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

68 per cent of shop stewards in the private sector have experienced redundancies and one in three reports of wage freezes within the last year - numbers that are considerably lower in the public sector. In fact, hardly any public sector shop stewards report about cutbacks in wages and relatively few inform about wage freezes, whilst one in four have experienced redundancies.

Having to lay off staff is particularly acute in the manufacturing, IT and construction sectors with up to 83 % of shop stewards in the manufacturing sector, 74 % in IT and 71 % in construction reporting of such experiences compared to one in two shop stewards in other sectors like retail, hotel restaurants and transport (see table 2).

Table 2: Effects of the crisis in the Danish workplace 2010 according to sector.. (Within the last year, has your workplace experienced one or more of the following...?) in per cent

	Dismissals	Wage freeze	Wage cutting	Threat of company closure	Recruitment stop for new personnel	Financial cutbacks	Outsourcing	None of the above
Manufacturing	83	32	7	15	48	71	25	3
Construction	71	39	17	8	26	51	8	7
IT	74	40	4	7	42	80	38	3
Administration	62	29	6	5	42	66	17	6
Retail	48	40	3	1	41	70	5	11
Transport	51	17	17	8	32	67	15	10
Cleaning	33	5	5	2	21	52	5	23
Restauration/Hotel	47	10	12	7	32	62	5	14
Public sector	26	4	1	5	44	70	10	10
Other private sector services	50	34	5	4	48	71	12	6

n=7876

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

Wage freezes and wage reductions and threat of company closure are also more common in sectors such as manufacturing construction and IT. Other sectors like retail, hotel and restaurants and cleaning appears less affected by the recession when looking at such indicators. The economic crisis seems therefore to have hit unevenly with some sectors less affected than others. Hence, financial cutbacks, outsourcing of services and production, merging of workplaces and stopping recruitment seems equally common across the branches/sectors. Therefore, when exploring how Danish shop stewards have handled the economic crisis at their workplace in the private sector, we distinguish between three types of companies: 1) companies hit by the recession in terms of cutbacks in wages, wage freezes, redundancies and/or threat of company closure along with other ways; 2) companies less affected by the crisis as they have not yet experienced redundancies, threat of company closure, wage freeze and reduction, but have been affected in other ways (, recruitment stop for new

personnel, financial cutbacks, restructuring the company, company merger and/or outsourcing); and 3) companies not affected by the crisis in terms of the indicators used in table 1. Table 3 illustrates the distribution of companies according to these three categories.

Table 3: Effects of the crisis in the Danish workplace according to shop stewards (2010) (Within the last year, has your workplace experienced one or more of the following...?) in per cent in the private sector

	Workplaces affected by the crisis
Highly affected by the crisis (redundancies, wage freeze, wage cutting and/or threat of company closure)	75
Less affected by the crisis (recruitment stop, financial cut backs, restructuring the company, merger and/or outsourcing)	19
Not affected by the crisis	6
Total	100

n=3,275

Three in four companies in the private sector are highly affected by the crisis, whilst 19 per cent less so and 6 per cent are not affected by the recession. This suggests that quite a few Danish companies have been affected by the crisis. However, has the crisis been discussed at company level? and what has been the role of shop stewards in developing such initiatives – do their negotiation skills play a role?

5.1. Discussing the Crisis

Within the last year, issues such annual wage regulation, lay off and recruitment of new staff, along with strategic questions regarding the future of the company, have dominated discussions at Danish workplaces. In fact, annual wage regulation, dismissals and recruitments have been on top of the workplace agenda just surpassed by discussions on the general content of the sectoral and the local agreements. Strategic questions about the future of the company figure relatively lower with 65 % of stop stewards having discussed this issue with management and/or colleagues compared to 81% debating annual wage regulation and dismissals/recruitment, respectively (Larsen et al, 2010).

It is primarily in companies most affected by the crisis that the issues of lay-off, recruitment of staff and strategic questions regarding the future of the company have been raised within the last year. In fact, only one in two shop stewards from workplaces not hit by the economic crisis have discussed dismissals, recruitment and the future of the company compared to the majority of their colleagues in sectors affected by the recession (see table 4).

Table 4: Shop stewards who have discussed the following subjects with colleagues and/or management within the last year according to how their workplace has been affected by the crisis in per cent (2010)

	Annual wage regulation	Dismissals/ Recruitment	Strategic questions regarding the future of the company	Total
Highly affected by the crisis	84	85	67	100
Less affected by the crisis	74	73	62	100
Not affected by the crisis	73	56	46	100
General average	81	81	65	100

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

More than four in five shop stewards have raised the issues of annual wage regulation, redundancies and recruitment within the last year and 67 per cent have discussed strategic questions related to the future of the company in companies highly affected by the crisis. Such numbers are considerably lower in companies less affected or not hit by the crisis, implying a close link exists between the type of subjects up for discussion at company level and the degree the companies are affected by the crisis.

Table 4 also reveals that a relatively large minority of shop stewards - even in companies affected by redundancies, threats of company closure and/or wage freezes and cutbacks - have not discussed these issues neither with management nor colleagues and even less so raised strategic questions regarding the future of the company. It is particularly newly elected shop stewards and those with no formal shop steward training that have not brought these issues up. (tables 5 and 6).

Table 5: Shop stewards who have not discussed the following subjects with colleagues and/or management within the last year according to seniority as a shop steward in per cent (2010)

	Annual wage regulation	Redundancies/ Recruitment	Strategic questions regarding the future of the company	Total
0-2 years	25	22	40	100
3-5 years	17	18	37	100
6 +years	17	18	30	100
General average	19	19	35	100

$n=3272$

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

Shop stewards with less than two years' experience are more likely than their more experienced colleagues not to discuss annual wage regulation with neither management nor colleagues. They are also less likely to bring up strategic questions regarding the future of the company with management and colleagues, compared to shop stewards with more six years or longer seniority. When discussions concerns redundancies and recruitment the difference is less marked.

It is not only the level of seniority that affects the way shop stewards bring attention to different issues at the workplace. Also their skill levels in terms of shop steward training plays a role (see table 6).

Table 6: Shop stewards that have not discussed the following subjects with colleagues and/or management within the last year according to formal shop steward qualifications in per cent (2010)

	Annual wage regulation	Redundancies/ Recruitment	Strategic questions regarding the future of the company	Total
Formal shop steward qualifications	18	17	32	100
No formal shop steward qualifications	24	28	46	100
General average	19	19	35	100

$n=3272$

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

17 per cent without formal shop steward training have not discussed redundancies compared to 28 per cent with formal shop steward qualifications. Likewise, shop stewards with formal training are more likely to discuss strategic questions regarding the future than those without training. Such findings support our hypothesis, since the less experienced shop steward both in terms of seniority and educational skills in many instances fail to bring attention to issues relevant to the crisis, even if they work at companies highly affected by layoffs, wage freezes and cutbacks and/or face the risk of closing down. But how does that actually affect the work place relations – and of what importance is the shop stewards’ skills and seniority when evaluating the cooperative culture at work level in times of crises?

5.2 Workplace relations

The general assumption that Danish unions and employers tend to dance rather than box to use some common metaphors is put to the test in times of crisis (Huzzard et al, 2004). Looking at the data, Danish employers tend increasingly to hold on to their management prerogatives when the economic situation changes for the worse. Four out of five shop stewards in companies being in some way affected by the crisis report that management hold on to their management prerogatives compared to 66 percent of shop stewards in companies not affected by the crisis (see table 7).

Table 7: Shop stewards that agree/disagree that with the following statement according to how their workplace has been affected by the crisis in per cent (2010)

	Management holds on to their management prerogatives				Total
	Fully/partly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly/fully disagree	Don't know	
Highly affected by the crisis	81	10	8	0	100
Less affected by the crisis	80	11	10	0	100
Not affected by the crisis	66	13	19	2	100
General average	80	10	9	0	100

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

That nearly twice as many shop stewards in companies not affected by the crisis partly or fully disagree with the statement listed in table 7 suggests that management is more reluctant to involve employees in management decisions in times of crisis. However, it is not only management that tend to be less willing to co-operate in companies highly affected by the crisis. Also the shop stewards are more likely to adopt a more adversarial approach when the company is under pressure (see table 8).

Table 8: Shop stewards that agree/disagree that with the following statement according to how their workplace has been affected by the crisis in per cent (2010)

	It is important to be able to give management an ultimatum in company based negotiations				Total
	Fully/partly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly/fully disagree	Don't know	
Highly affected by the crisis	66	19	13	2	100
Less affected by the crisis	63	21	14	2	100
Not affected by the crisis	57	18	20	5	100

General average	65	20	14	2	100
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n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

57 per cent of shop stewards in companies not affected by the crisis partly or fully agree with the statement ‘it is important to be able to give management an ultimatum in company based negotiations’ compared to 66 per cent in companies highly affected by the crisis. It is especially in companies where management holds on to their management prerogatives that shop stewards emphasise the need to adopt a firm stance. Up to 70 per cent of shop stewards partly or fully agree with the statement outlined in table 9 in such companies compared to one in two companies where management comes across as more inclusive and collaborative.

Table 9: Shop stewards that fully/partly agree with the statement: ‘It is important to be able to give management an ultimatum in company based negotiations’ according to the statement ‘Management holds on to their management prerogatives’ in per cent (2010)

		It is important to be able to give management an ultimatum in company based negotiations		
		<i>Fully/partly agree</i>	<i>Don't know</i>	<i>Total</i>
Management holds on to their management prerogatives	Fully agree	70	2	100
	Partly agree	64	1	100
	Neither agree nor disagree	46	6	100
	Partly disagree	59	0	100
	Fully disagree	52	8	100

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

The findings suggest that management and shop stewards alike tend to adopt more adversarial approaches in times of crisis and that such strategies often seem to reinforce each other. Therefore, the collaborative and consensus based approach often used to describe the Danish labour relations appears less widespread in times of crisis. It is, however, worth noting that a relatively large minority of shop stewards disagree that management hold on to their managerial rights and that the possibility to give management an ultimatum is important, even in companies highly affected by the crisis – see tables 7 and 8.

The seniority and skills level of the shop steward seems to matter to some degree when the shop stewards are evaluating the cooperative culture. Looking at seniority, both newly elected and more experienced shop stewards from companies highly affected by the crisis report that management hold on to their management prerogatives. They also deem the possibility to give management an ultimatum when bargaining locally important. However, differences appear among shop stewards in companies not affected by the crisis, especially regarding their account of management as being more adversarial (see table 10).

Table 10: Shop stewards that fully/partly agree with the following statements according to how their workplace has been affected by the crisis in per cent and seniority as a shop steward in percent (2010)

	Management holds on to their management prerogatives			It is important to be able to give management an ultimatum in company based negotiations			
	<i>Highly affected</i>	<i>Less affected</i>	<i>Not affected</i>	<i>Highly affected</i>	<i>Less affected</i>	<i>Not affected</i>	<i>Total</i>
0-2 years	81	78	83	68	57	57	100
3-5 years	82	87	59	64	63	53	100
6 +years	81	77	62	66	65	60	100
General average	81	80	67	66	63	58	81

n=3272

High significance, p = 0,000 (Chi²)

Some 80 per cent of the newly as well as the more experienced shop stewards in companies highly affected by the crisis report that management hold on to their managerial rights. As such there is no difference related to seniority. However, this number is considerably lower among the more experienced shop stewards in companies *not affected* by the crisis with 62 per cent agreeing that management hang on to there managerial prerogative. Their colleagues with less than two years' seniority, however, do experience that management takes a less involving stance. However, when it comes to being able to give management an ultimatum in company based negotiations, the differences between the experienced and newly elected shop stewards are less pronounced, irrespectively of the economic situation at the workplace. Such findings suggest that the less experienced shop stewards feel slightly insecure in their relations with management which could be down to their lack of experience in company bargaining and cooperation.

So – is this linked to lack of formal shop steward qualifications? While there is very little difference between the trained and not trained shop stewards' evaluation of the cooperative culture in companies not affected by the crises, slightly more shop stewards with training than without training detect a difference in management style in companies highly affected by the crises (see table 11).

Table 11: Shop stewards that fully/partly agree with the following statements according to how their workplace has been affected by the crisis in per cent and formal shop steward qualifications in per cent (2010)

	Management holds on to their management prerogatives			It is important to be able to give management an ultimatum in company based negotiations			
	Highly affected	Less affected	Not affected	Highly affected	Less affected	Not affected	Total
Formal shop steward qualifications	83	81	67	66	61	60	100
No formal shop steward qualifications	76	72	65	65	70	51	100
General average	81	80	67	66	63	58	100

n=3272

High significance, p = 0,000 (Chi²)

Summing up, the findings reveals, - especially when compared with the shop stewards level of seniority – that the level of practical experience rather than formal shop training qualifications appears crucial to how shop stewards handle the economic crisis in terms of their relations with management. Those less experienced are more likely to find management adversarial. To some degree these results supports the hypothesis that shop stewards’ lack of experience and skills to negotiate during the crisis. Hence, it is noticeable that the general level of tension seems higher in crises-affected companies than in companies not affected by the crises.

5.3 Involvement in strategic and economic decisions

Shop stewards have to varying degrees raised strategic questions concerning the future of the company with management as mentioned earlier. However, even if such strategies have been discussed at the workplace, this seldom equals influence on the actual decision-making process. Most shop stewards report that they only to a limited degree have been involved in the strategic and economic decisions at the workplace, irrespectively of the company’s economic situation (see table 12).

Table 12: Shop stewards that agree/disagree with the following statements according to how their workplace has been affected by the crisis in per cent (2010)

	Discussed strategic questions regarding the future of the company*	I have only to a limited degree been involved in the strategic and economic decisions at the workplace**				
		Fully/partly agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Partly/fully disagree	Don't know	Total
Highly affected by the crisis	67	64	17	16	3	100
Less affected by the crisis	62	62	16	18	5	100
Not affected by the crisis	46	58	23	15	4	100
General average	65	63	17	16	4	100

n=3272

*High significance, p = 0,000 (Chi²)

** Low significances p= 0,236 (Chi²)

63 per cent of shop stewards have raised strategic questions regarding the future of the company, but only 16 per cent have participated in the strategic and economic decisions – a number that hardly varies across the sampled companies. This suggests that although most shop stewards are actively engaged in discussions related to the future of their workplace and management therefore comes across as collaborative in line with the general characteristic of Danish management-employee relations, this form of involvement tends to be merely informative and consultative.

Even if management in most cases exclude shop stewards from the decision-making process, table 12 also reveals that 16 per cent of shop stewards report that management pursue an inclusive approach by involving them, even in companies highly affected by the crisis. The shop stewards participating in the strategic and economic decisions are often the more experienced - typically having more than six years of seniority.

Table 13: Shop stewards that agree/disagree with the following statements according to seniority as a shop steward in per cent (2010)

	I have only to a limited degree been involved in the strategic and economic decisions at the workplace				
	Fully/partly agree	Neither agree/disagree	Partly/fully disagree	Don't know	Total
0-2 years	65	16	12	6	100
3-5 years	63	20	14	3	100
6 + years	62	15	20	3	100
General average	63	17	16	4	100

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi²)

As table 13 shows, one in five shop stewards with more than six years' experience as a shop steward is involved in the strategic and economic decisions compared to 12 % with less than two years' experience. Also shop stewards with 3-5 years seniority tend to be excluded from this involvement, indicating a close link between shop stewards' practical experience as shop stewards and how management involve them in the process. By contrast, their training skills seems less important. Nearly just as many shop stewards with formal shop steward training as those without report that they are part of the economic and strategic decisions (see table 14).

Table 14: Shop stewards that agree/disagree with the following statements according to formal shop steward qualifications in per cent (2010)

	I have only to a limited degree been involved in the strategic and economic decisions at the workplace				
	Fully/partly agree	Neither agree/' Disagree	Partly/fully disagree	Don't know	Total
Formal shop steward qualifications	63	17	17	3	100
No formal shop steward qualifications	62	17	16	6	100
General average	63	17	16	3	100

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi²)

Managements' tendency to involve the more experienced shops stewards and less so their newly elected colleagues in the decision-making process, suggest that the experience of shop stewards is - crucial for their involvement in company based responses to the crisis. Those lacking the skills in terms of seniority tend to be excluded from strategic and economic decisions.

These results add a new perspective to our hypothesis: With regards to involvement in strategic and economic decisions, formal training is of no importance whilst seniority as shop steward matters to some degree. This suggests that the formal shop steward training fails to some degree to educate shop stewards to try to get influence on this area.

5.4 Wage bargaining in times of crisis

Wage freeze and cutbacks in wages are issues many Danish shop stewards have had to deal with since the crises started as mentioned earlier. 43 per cent in companies highly affected by the crisis

have experienced wage freezes and one in ten report about cutbacks in wages. However, relatively few shop stewards affected by this - one in ten - have signed local agreements on wage freezes/reductions (table 15).

Table 15: Shop stewards that experienced wage freezes and cutbacks and have signed local agreements on these subjects according to how their workplace has been affected by the economic crisis in per cent (2010)

	Highly affected	Less affected	Not affected	General average
Experienced wage freeze	43	:	:	32
Experienced cutbacks in wages	11	:	:	8
Local agreements on wage freeze/reductions	9	1	0	7
No tradition for local bargaining	28	36	48	31
Total	100	100	100	100

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

It is striking that relatively few shop stewards have concluded local agreements on these topics considering that as many as 43 per cent have had to deal with cutbacks in wages and wage freezes *and* have the traditions and structures in place for local bargaining. This suggests that management in most companies affected by wage freezes and cutbacks simply just informs about such initiatives and thereby comes across as having unilaterally decided to reduce and/or freeze wages. Indeed, management appears to have in effect ignored the shop steward, even if formal bargaining structures exist at the workplace. Table 15 also reveals that in few companies the decisions regarding wage freeze and cutbacks are a result of a local bargaining process, where the shop stewards have co-determined the decision by concluding a local agreement with management. Interestingly, seniority plays no role for the involvement here; both experienced and less experienced shop stewards have been part of negotiating local agreements on wage reduction and/or freezes (see table 16).

Table 16: Shop stewards that have signed local agreements on wage freeze and reductions according how their workplace has been affected by the crisis and seniority as shop steward in per cent (2010)

	Signed local agreements on wage freezes- and reductions			
	Highly affected	Less affected	Not affected	Total
0-2 years	9	1	:	100
3-5 years	9		:	100
6 + years	9	1	.	100
General average	9	1	:	100

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

Also when we look to shop stewards skill levels in terms of formal training do we find limited or no difference in who have signed or not signed local agreements on wage stop and cutbacks. This indicates that shop stewards skill levels as well as seniority have limited if no effect on the quantity of local agreements on these issues (see table 17). However, the data does not reveal the content of these agreements and whether some groups of shop stewards have been more successful than others in striking compromises that are more beneficial to their colleagues.

Table 17: Shop stewards that have signed local agreements on wage freeze and reductions according how their workplace has been affected by the crisis and formal shop steward qualifications in per cent (2010)

	Signed local agreements on wage freezes- and reductions			
	Highly affected	Less affected	Not affected	Total
Formal shop steward qualifications	9	1	:	100
No formal shop steward qualifications	8	:	:	100
General average	9	1	:	100

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi²)

Therefore, as opposed to the question of involvement in strategic and economic decisions, there is no marked difference between experienced and less experienced shop stewards when signing agreements on wage freeze or wage reduction. Also, no difference exists according to formal skills. This indicates that there might be a new nuance to our thesis: The co-operative practices in Danish companies and especially how close management and employees dance depend on the different phases of the bargaining process under consideration. Management is more inclined to involve shop stewards in the execution of their decisions rather than in the actual decision-making process – aspects which appear even more evident when we look at shop stewards’ involvement in the lay off of staff.

5.6 Involvement in dismissals

Whilst shop stewards only to a limited extend have been involved in the decisions regarding wage reductions and freezes, the situation is slightly different when it comes to the process of laying off staff. 12 per cent of shop stewards in companies have not been involved in the lay-off process whatsoever. However, the vast majority have mainly been informed about management’s decision on who will be dismissed, and they have typically discussed the lay-offs with colleagues and management alike. In some companies though, the shop steward has been more actively involved in the decision-making process around dismissals (see table 18).

Table 18: Shop stewards involvement in the process of laying off staff in per cent (2010) - Only shop steward having experienced dismissals at the workplace

Experienced lay offs at the company	68
I have not been involved in the process of lay offs	12
Discussed redundancies and recruitment with management and/or colleagues in companies experiencing lay offs	96
I have been informed by management prior to the dismissals	77
I have been consulted by management regarding who among the employees should be dismissed	45
I have co-determined the decision regarding who among the employees should be dismissed	15
I have signed local agreements on redundancies and recruitment	19

n=3272

One in five shop stewards have signed local agreements on redundancies and recruitment, and another 15 per cent co-determined the decision on who to dismiss, whilst 45 per cent were

consulted by management regarding this issue. This form of involvement reflect a relatively inclusive and collaborative approach on both sides of industry, especially in companies, where shop stewards have been consulted by management or even co-determined the decision on who to dismiss among their colleagues. However, it has to be kept in mind that the decision to dismiss employees it a very difficult one. By involving the shop steward management makes the shop steward co-responsible for the decision. Whether this is appropriate or not is discussed widely at enterprise level as well as in unions (Rolfsen, 2011; Bacon and Blyton, 2002).

The more experienced shop stewards both in terms of their seniority and formal skill levels are more likely to have been part of this process and had their say (table 19 and 20).

Table 19: Shop stewards involvement in the process of laying off staff according to formal shop steward qualifications in per cent (2010)

	Have not been involved*	Consulted by management on who to dismiss**	Informed by management prior to dismissals*	Co-determined the decision on who to dismiss***	Signed local agreements on dismissals/ Recruitment*
Formal shop steward qualifications	10	45	78	16	21
No formal shop steward qualifications	22	37	60	11	9
General average	12	44	75	15	19

n=3272

High significance, *p = 0,000 (Chi²), ** p = 0,001 (Chi²) *** p = 0,005 (Chi²)

Twice as many shop stewards with formal shop steward qualifications than without have been involved in the lay-off process one way or another. They have also to a greater extent participated in the actual the decision-making process with 16 per cent having co-determined the decision and 45 per cent been consulted by management on who to dismiss compared to 11 per cent and 37 per cent of their peers without formal shop steward qualifications, respectively. Also when it comes to negotiating and concluding local agreements concerning dismissals and recruitment do the skill levels of shop stewards play a role. One in five shop stewards with formal shop steward qualifications have signed local agreements whilst this applies to one in ten without such qualifications, even if they have the tradition and formal structures in place for local bargaining. This suggests that level of involvement of shop stewards in the lay-off process and especially the degree of influence depends on their negotiations skills.

Shop stewards' practical experience also seems to play a role regarding. The longer a shop steward has had the job, the more likely he/she is to have influenced the lay-off process in one way or the other (table 20).

Table 20: Shop stewards involvement in the process of laying off staff according to seniority as a shop steward in per cent (2010)

	Have not been involved	Consulted by management on who to dismiss*	Informed by management prior to dismissals	Co-determined the decision on who to dismiss**	Signed local agreements on dismissals/ recruitment
0-2 years	16	38	67	13	13
3-5 years	12	43	75	14	18

6 + years	9	47	78	17	22
General average	12	44	75	15	19

n=3272

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi²) * $p = 0,001$ (Chi²), ** $p = 0,009$ (Chi²)

Whilst 38 per cent of the newly elected shop stewards have been consulted by management and 13 per cent have co-determined the decision on who to dismiss, these numbers are somewhat higher among the more experienced shop stewards, particularly among those with more than six years seniority. The more experienced shop stewards have also to a greater extent negotiated local agreements concerning redundancies and recruitment than their less experienced colleagues, even when taking the tradition for local bargaining into consideration.

All in all, these findings suggest that the engagement of shop stewards in the lay-off process not only depend on the different stages within this process. Also their negotiation skills in terms of seniority and formal shop steward qualifications proves crucial. The more experienced shop stewards appears to take a more active role in both the execution of management's decisions and the actual decision-making process, whilst the newly elected shop steward to a greater extent are excluded, even if the most common practice regarding company dismissals is that management solely decide who to dismiss and then involves the shop steward when it comes to inform their colleagues about the results.

Again, the results shed new light over our hypothesis. While management is quite reluctant to involve employee representatives in strategic and economic decisions, they are way more involving when it comes to the difficult task of dismissing employees – and picking the ones to be fired. While the data shows higher involvement among trained shop stewards an important question is if they feel they have the competencies to to engage in such forms of dialogue and decision-making.

6.1 Lacking the competencies to negotiate

The above analysis reveals that a relatively large group of shop stewards have been involved in developing local company responses to the crisis in one way or the other. However, it is far from all that feel they have the competencies to do so, although they generally speaking are confident when bargaining with management (Larsen et al, 2010). Among the shop stewards dealing with wage freezes, cutbacks and redundancies, only 39 per cent report that they have the adequate competencies (table 21).

Table 21: Shop stewards that agree/disagree with the following statements in per cent (2010) – only shop stewards that have experienced wage freezes, wage reduction and/or dismissals

I have the competencies to negotiate wage freeze, cutbacks in wages and dismissals with management	
To a very high /high degree	40
Neither agree nor disagree	30
To a low/very low degree	26
Don't know	5
Total	100

n= 2467

One in four shop stewards report specifically that they do not have the competencies to engage in company negotiations regarding wage stop, cutbacks in wages and lay-offs. Newly elected shop

stewards and those with no formal shop steward training in particular lack adequate skills to enter such forms of negotiations with nearly one in three reporting that their skills are insufficient (see table 22 and 23).

Table 22: Shop stewards that agree/disagree with the following statements according to seniority as a shop steward in per cent (2010) – only shop stewards that have experienced wage freezes, wage reduction and/or dismissals

	I have the competencies to negotiate wage freeze, cutbacks in wages and dismissals with management				
	To a very high/high degree	Neither agree nor disagree	To a low/very low degree	Don't know	Total
0-2 years	30	36	29	6	100
3-5 years	35	34	27	4	100
6 + years	48	24	24	4	100
General average	39	30	26	5	100

n= 2467

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

By contrast, the more experienced shop stewards often to have the competencies to negotiate wage cutbacks and freezes along with lay-offs. However, even among the more experienced shop stewards do nearly one in four face difficulties when bargaining with management. Having to negotiate in times of crisis is therefore a challenging task for many shop stewards, even if they have the practical experience.

Shop steward training courses seem to be of some help. 43 per cent of shop stewards with formal shop steward qualifications feel able to handle negotiations on wage freezes and cutbacks along with lay-offs among colleagues compared to one in four without such qualifications. The latter are also more likely to report that they lack the competencies to negotiate in times of crisis (table 23).

Table 23: Shop stewards that agree/disagree with the following statements according to formal shop steward qualifications in per cent (2010) – only shop stewards that have experienced wage freezes, wage reduction and/or dismissals

	I have the competencies to negotiate wage freeze, cutbacks in wages and dismissals with management				
	To a very high/high degree	Neither agree nor disagree	To a low/very low degree	Don't know	Total
Formal shop steward qualifications	43	28	25	4	100
No formal shop steward qualifications	26	36	32	7	100
General average	39	30	26	5	100

n= 2467

High significance, $p = 0,000$ (Chi^2)

All in all, the findings reveal that many shop stewards report their negotiation skills as inadequate to handle the crisis, even if they have several years of experience as shop stewards and have been on shop steward training courses. Indeed, this questions to some degree the sustainability of the Danish model, particularly as shop stewards play a key role in sectors, where bargaining powers

increasingly are decentralized towards company level. Their difficulties in matching management particularly in times of crisis reflect some weaknesses within the Danish bargaining model as it depends on strong representation from both sides of industry at both sectoral and company levels.

Discussion and Conclusion

Several factors are at play when analysing the shop steward’s role during the financial crisis. In the paper, we have particularly focused the potential link between shop stewards’ involvement in company based responses and their negotiation skills in order to test the hypothesis ‘shop stewards often lack the experience and skills (defined as formal shop steward qualification and practical experience in terms of seniority) to negotiate during the recent economic crisis’. We have explored how they have discussed the crisis at company, their engagement in company based bargaining and decisions on wage freezes and reductions, lay off of staff and the future of the company along with their relations with management.

The empirical findings reveal a relatively clear picture: the trained and experienced shop stewards consider themselves as having better negotiations skills, are more likely to have discussed redundancies and raised strategic questions with management and/or colleagues (see table 24)

Table 24: The shop stewards’ evaluation of negotiation competencies and issues discussed with colleagues and management – according to seniority and training/no training – in per cent

<i>All companies</i>	Shop Steward Seniority		Shop Steward Training	
	0-2 years	+ 6 years	No formal training	Formally trained
Have competences to negotiate wage stop/wage reductions/redundancies	30	48	26	43
Redundancies - have not discussed	22	18	28	17
Strategic questions – have not discussed	40	30	48	32

When we focus on how shop stewards more explicitly deal with the crisis in companies highly affected by the recession in terms of having to deal with lay-offs, wage freezes, cutbacks in wages and/or company closure, the picture is more diverse. For example, the skills acquired through training appears to have limited if not no influence on the level of involvement in strategic questions– while seniority as a shop steward plays a role. The more experienced shop stewards are more likely to be part of strategic and economic decisions at the workplace (see table 25) .

Table 25: The shop stewards involvement in strategic/economic decisions and lay-offs and their evaluation of management prerogatives – in per cent

<i>Only companies highly affected by the crises</i>	Shop Steward Seniority		Shop Steward Qualifications	
	0-2 years	+ 6 years	No formal training	Formally trained
Strategic & economic decisions– have only been limited involved	65	62	62	63
Strategic & economic decisions – have been involved	12	20	16	17
Only companies having had to lay off:				
Informed about lay-offs	67	78	60	78

Not involved in lay-offs	16	9	22	10
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The findings suggest that formal training has been of little help to shop stewards when it comes to influencing the strategic level, but how to interpret the result that seniority plays a role? One explanation could be that management is more prone to involve shop stewards that over the years have shown to be stable and reliable partners. Another and perhaps supplementary explanation could be that shop steward training courses simply do not focus on developing skills to influence strategic and economic decisions at company level.

Whilst formal shop steward skills have less effect on shop stewards' involvement at the strategic level, the situation is quite different when it comes to the process of laying off staff. In such situations, both the trained and more experienced shop steward are more likely to be involved than their newly elected colleagues and those without formal training qualifications.

Furthermore, also the perception of the workplace relations tend to differ between shop stewards depending on their skill levels, especially when we look at companies highly affected by the crisis. Slightly more shop stewards with than without formal training experience that management hold on to their management prerogatives whilst seniority as a shop stewards play less of a role (table 26).

Table 26: The shop stewards' evaluations of managements' cooperative attitude – in per cent

<i>Only companies highly affected by the crises</i>	Shop Steward Seniority		Shop Steward Training	
	0-2 years	+ 6 years	No formal training	Formally trained
Management hold on to their <i>management prerogatives</i>	81	81	76	83
It is important to be able to give management an ultimatum in company based negotiations	68	66	66	65

Looking across the data the general tendency is that seniority and training matters – but in different area:

Seniority matters regarding:

- Competences to negotiate wage stop/wage reductions/redundancies
- Involvement in strategic/economic questions
- Involvement in and information on lay offs

Seniority does not matter/matters very little regarding:

- The view on whether management hang on to their management prerogatives
- The importance given to being able to give management an ultimatum

Formal training matters regarding:

- Competences to negotiate wage stop/wage reductions/redundancies
- Involvement in and information on lay offs
- The view on whether management hang on to their management prerogatives

Formal training does not matter/matters very little regarding:

- Involvement in strategic/economic questions

- The importance given to being able to give management an ultimatum

It is striking that formal training has no influence on the shop stewards' evaluation of their involvement in strategic/economic decisions and the importance of being able to take a firm stand; here it could have been expected that these questions had a high priority in the union training of shop stewards as this is an area where the employees could get make a difference– and could put power behind their views. Instead, it seems that seniority is of importance to get strategic/economic influence. This suggests that there might be a personal trust-issue at stake; when the shop steward over the years get acquainted with management and the financial situation of the company, they also get to know the rules of the game, and management tend to involve them more.

However, this does not change a widespread view that management hold on to their management prerogatives, especially in times of crisis. The general picture is that although most shop stewards, along with their colleagues, are actively engaged in issues related to their workplace, this form of involvement tends to be merely informative and consultative, and when companies are hit hard by the crisis, the level of involvement diminishes. Management also appears more prone to involve the shop stewards in the decision-making process when it concerns the execution of management decisions rather than the long-term financial and strategic decisions. The issue at stake seems to be very decisive for the level of involvement, and it seems that training has not prepared shop stewards to exploit this window of opportunity at company level.

As described earlier, the union density and the coverage of collective agreements in Denmark is comparatively high, and with a relatively decentralised bargaining system, the importance of the shop stewards is not to be underestimated. Due to the Danish IR-model, the power balance at company level is if not equal then more equal than seen in many other countries. Nevertheless, the involvement of shop stewards is limited and is even more restricted when the company is in crisis. If this is the case in a system with such equilibrium, we can only imagine how difficult it is for shop stewards to get influence in an IR-system with single-employer arrangements instead of centralised multi-employer bargaining, low union density and low coverage of collective agreements, which is the case in many other countries hit by the crisis – for example the Anglo-Saxon countries.

In this paper, we have had our focus on skills, understood as seniority and formal training. Further research could elaborate on other of the shop stewards' characteristics. The Shop Steward Survey 2010 reveals that shop stewards are quite different politically and that could influence their attitude towards management. The survey also shows that their union affiliation is to some degree decisive for whether they have an adversarial or a cooperative approach to management. Involving these data in the analysis will obviously shed new lights on the complexity of the shop stewards role.

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