



Magazine for entrepreneurs in Norway

Omega Norwegian Solutions

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Dear Readers,

The spring edition of our magazine focuses on matters that will be a priority for all of us in the upcoming weeks. For those who requested a deadline extension, May is the time to file their tax return. A simple formality for some, an unpleasant and time-consuming obligation for others: regardless of how you feel about it, declaring your income to the tax authority is always something that makes your heart pound. After all, it's usually large amounts of money that are at stake. *"Am I getting a refund or do I have to pay?"* is the question we are all asking ourselves hoping that the numbers will show that we have paid excess tax.

For the Polish Connection team, this is a particularly busy time of the year. Over the last 12 years, we have handled tens of thousands of tax returns and tax appeals. Thanks to you, we have been able to gain experience and expertise that none of our competitors is able to offer. This is our most valuable capital.

On 16 April, the Polish expat community in Norway named the winners of the sixth edition of "The Outstanding Pole" contest. The prizes were presented at an award gala in the following categories: culture, science, business, and personality. The winners in the four categories included representatives of the young generation. We are proud to have been one of the sponsors of

yet another edition of the event. The guests at the award gala enjoyed a performance by the prominent jazz pianist, Leszek Mozdzer, an iconic figure in Polish culture with a modern and fashionable twist. We hope that you will enjoy reading the interview with him.



As usual, we have prepared some articles with relevant information for business owners. Our experts explain what companies should establish cooperation with occupational health service units, and how it should be done to comply with the law. Also in this edition you will find a business owner's guide to hiring an accounting firm. Other topics include procedures to follow in case of bankruptcy, and the impact that an employee's length of service may have on the termination procedure. Wishing you a green and fruitful spring season, Aleksandra F. Eriksen, President of Polish Connection

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I'm a lucky man: an interview with Leszek Możdżer

This year's gala of "The Outstanding Pole" contest in Oslo, Norway, was highlighted by a performance from the world famous pianist and composer, Leszek Możdżer. We have used this opportunity to ask Leszek to share his reflections on the role of music and culture in today's world, the ups and downs of traveling, and his definition of success.

Sylvia Skorstad: You are going to perform at this year's gala of "The Outstanding Pole" contest in Norway. Is this going to be a performance like any other for you or do you find this kind of events somehow special?

Leszek Możdżer: A concert is an ancient ritual created by culture, and for a performer, it's rather irrelevant whether he plays at a gala or a ticketed concert. You need to prepare for it exactly the same way, reach the ultimate level of concentration, and achieve the purest form of spirit possible. Music is like vibrating air, and a live performance involves the search for beauty which is something we all desperately need in our lives. It's something that "Outstanding Poles" need just as much as "Outstanding Norwegians". We all need it.

S.S.: You have been to Norway before. What are your impressions of this country?

L.M.: Usually, when I travel for concerts, my stays are very short. I was lucky, though, to have spent a few days in Oslo with Dominik Bukowski, and rehearse with the string quartet Cikada. Marek Konstantynowicz showed us a few interesting places, such as the legendary Rainbow Studio, and we had the chance to meet Jan Erik Kong-

shaug who's actually a historical figure for us as he recorded some of the most important records in the history of modern jazz. I also have to say that winter in Norway is just as bad as in Poland.

S.S.: Have you ever dreamed of moving abroad? If so, where to? Or perhaps you travel so frequently that you already feel as a citizen of the world?

L.M.: I used to think that you could become happy by changing the place you live. Now I know that happiness is an internal process. Luckily, I travel a lot. I've seen many places around the world but my fate sent me to Poland. I was born there, and that's where I want to live. I love my Fatherland and I want to be a part of it.

S.S.: Is there anything about Norwegian or Nordic culture that you find inspiring?

L.M.: Obviously, the first name that comes to my mind is Jan Garbarek. His music has had a great influence on me. Even though I play a different instrument, I've incorporated some of the ornamental structures he uses which were completely new to me, such as appoggiaturas, into my own musical language. He's a great musician.

S.S.: Do you think that an individual can build a good or bad image of his country abroad? It's an interesting question for people living outside

their home country because it affects their everyday lives. Wouldn't it be better if we could just be ourselves rather than represent our nation?

L.M.: An individual mind has the greatest power. Whether you want it or not, you represent your nation, and you can contribute to it because you don't really own your mind. The greatest spiritual teachers emphasized the fact that you should take care of your mental hygiene because they realized that if the quality of your thinking deteriorates, it can harm others. There's a thing called collective consciousness: each nation has its own set of information that it keeps alive because each process taking place in an individual's mind adds new resources to the collective consciousness. Over time, the most noteworthy and powerful concepts and ideas make their way through to the mainstream and become the canons of thinking. It's a process that cannot be stopped. News reports are generally short-lived, so you need a constant supply of news to keep things the way they are. For example, you need to constantly promote money so that people believe that it has real value. Money is promoted in films, daily radio contests, and even in children's books. Still, the collective consciousness of a nation has its own vibe to it which is made up of individual minds. If you take care of your own mind, your nation will be healthy, too. Also, there have been some major breakthroughs in genetics recently, and we are now able to trace back the noble Slavic gene, known as haplogroup R1a1, which is found for instance among Poles, Norwegians, and even the peoples of India. It turns out that borders not only divide people but unite them, too.

S.S.: Can culture serve as a bridge between people who don't share a common language? How much impact can a concert by a Polish performer make in Japan, Norway or Canada?

L.M.: Artists deal with an aspect of culture that involves abstraction, and they make others realize that abstract ideas are serious. After all, music is an abstract language. Before establishing diplomatic relations, politicians use cultural exchange. They organize concerts or exhibitions. In the political jargon, this type of interactions are known as "soft". I think that culture shouldn't be distinguished as a separate aspect of the reality

because it's a natural environment for us. Culture used to be considered a branch of the economy but it's the economy that is a branch of culture. Everything is culture: culture is what we eat, what we watch, what we think, what we say, and what we are able to do for money. Body language and emotions are culture, too, just like the understanding of the earthly and spiritual laws. Humanity can only be reborn through culture. Music or painting in early childhood helps children to develop neural pathways connecting the frontal lobes which are responsible for higher emotions and the common good. Humanity will not survive without culture.

S.S.: I wonder how your international experiences have changed the way you think, the same way people change when living in a foreign country. When living abroad, we realize that the traditions present in our culture, such as blessing Easter foods, are unknown in other parts of the world. We begin to understand the conventional nature of rituals, which can lead to a feeling of emptiness. What do you gain by having a vast knowledge about the world, and what do you lose?

L.M.: A key to understanding all rituals in life is the Truth. The feeling of inner emptiness is understandable. In most cases, though, it has to do with the fact that we don't understand rituals that carry great wisdom. The idea behind blessing food, or sprinkling water over it, is that water is an effective carrier of information. Water can be programmed, and there is already scientific evidence for it, such as the research done by Professor Masaru Emoto. The information contained in water penetrates into the food, and when the food is consumed, it becomes part of the person's energy. However, neither the priest whose job is to program the water, nor the worshipper who comes to church with a basket of foods knows that.

We are all going to undergo an amazing process which will allow us to understand the true meaning of folk culture and rediscover it. Science and mysticism are slowly beginning to speak with one voice, and we are about to experience a great revival of the wisdom of our ancestors. The techniques to ensure success and happiness in life will



Foto: Włodek Kościelniak

become more clear and obvious. The old mendacious system is obviously still in place but there are fewer and fewer arguments in its favour.

S.S.: You are a successful and internationally acclaimed artist. Do you think that there's a universal recipe for success? Is it more about talent or hard work? Or is it something else?

L.M.: It's hard to define success because many successful people have paid a high price for it. I think that there are two main approaches: love for mankind and hatred for mankind. The first one is a guarantee of success. The second one can probably make you successful, too, but I guess it's not the type of success you would want. Everything in between these two is unlikely to make you successful.

S.S.: What makes a person outstanding? Who do you consider outstanding in terms of their contribution to music, culture or world history in general?

L.M.: When it comes to music, there are two components that make a musician outstanding: an ex-

cellent technique and a noble spirit. You need to work really hard to achieve either of these things. If someone with a great interior life is able to express himself using a superb technique, you can say that he's making outstanding art.

S.S.: Emigrants are usually stressed out. There's always something that hurts, whether it's homesickness, not being able to speak the language, loneliness, lack of understanding, insecurities, fear... The list could go on and on. Could you please recommend some spirit lifting music to us? What do you listen to when you need to restore your inner balance?

L.M.: The best thing you can do to lift your spirits is sing a song together. All you need to do is print out the lyrics of your favourite songs from the Internet, learn the guitar or piano chords, make something delicious to eat, meet with your friends, and sing together. If you can't play any instrument, invite a musician over. Actually, that's what we, musicians, are for.

A Business Owner's Guide to Hiring an Accounting Firm

As a business owner, you need to decide whether you want to do your accounting yourself or outsource it to professionals. One of the questions you need to consider is if you have the time for it.



Changes in the tax and labour regulations require a careful reading of the laws, which can be extremely time-consuming. Accurate book-keeping and accurate financial settlements and payments to staff, as well as careful record keeping and ensuring confidentiality of the information are crucial to successful business operations.

Professional accounting firms have relevant certificates which evidence their expertise and

skills in bookkeeping and accounting. The certificates are a guarantee that your books will be accurately kept.

Good accounting firms providing tax services also hold third-party liability insurance which provides coverage against damage resulting from the services provided by the firm (e.g. tax errors).

By outsourcing your accounting operations to a professional service provider, you minimize

the time spent on fulfilling your tax and reporting obligations. By doing that, you also eliminate the risk associated with inaccurate bookkeeping and any unexpected costs that this may involve.

Below, you will find some key tips on how to work with an accounting firm

1. Learn what services are offered

The services offered by an accounting firm typically include advice, opinions and clarifications about tax law, representation vis-a-vis tax authorities, handling of HR-related matters, and accounting.

2. Don't wait until the last minute

If you have a legal or tax-related doubt, don't wait for the deadline to come to seek advice – solve it immediately. It can be difficult to find the best suited solution when you're under time pressure.

3. You have a say in what services you get and on what terms

If you prefer to do some of the activities (e.g. payroll, etc.) yourself, share your suggestions with the provider. The accounting firm will come up with another solution that will be suitable both for you and the firm considering all legal, tax and organisational aspects.

4. Negotiate the most advantageous terms

Don't get discouraged. If the first offer doesn't meet your expectations, simply tell the firm what you expect to get.

5. Cooperate

Providing legal and tax services is not a one-way relationship where the accounting firm is the only party involved. The firm will apply its best efforts to provide your company with a professional service but it won't be able to help you if you have no time for cooperation.

6. If you don't have the time, appoint a contact person

Think and determine specific competencies of the person appointed to contact the accounting firm on your behalf, including the extent to which this person will be able to engage in business talks. Many companies have a solution in place where their settlement documents are

sent directly from the relevant authority's office to the accounting firm.

7. Make an appointment and prepare for the meeting

Before contacting the accounting firm, give some thought to the problem or matter you want to discuss. Note down the things you wish to discuss at the meeting and the questions you want to ask. When scheduling an appointment over the phone, mention the problem for which you need advice. That way, the firm's employees will have the time to review the problem and prepare to give advice to you, as well as specify what documents you should bring with you to the meeting. This will help you and the firm use the time effectively.

8. Make sure to timely submit all documents to the firm

This is key to ensure that the accounting firm responds or corrects some of the solutions, and will save you money in the end. Some of the deadlines set by the tax office are final, and failure to meet the deadline may involve sanctions for the taxpayer.

9. Consult important decisions with the firm

Consult any cost-related investments with the firm before you start performing the contract. The accounting firm will recommend the most favourable solution for your business in terms of taxes, and suggest which option you should choose.

10. Ask if the firm has third-party liability insurance

If you incur damage due to an incorrect interpretation or error of the accounting firm, you can recover your money from the insurance company providing coverage to the firm. A good accounting firm will typically hold third-party liability insurance covering damage resulting from tax consulting or bookkeeping services provided by it.

Overall, hiring an accounting firm offers numerous advantages. It will give you the peace of mind that your company's books are accurate and complete.

Are Norwegian jobs really threatened by foreign labour?

More and more foreign companies win tenders and undertake construction works across Norway. Should the Norwegians fear for their jobs?

For many years, Norwegian employees did not feel threatened by foreign companies. With their jobs secured, they worked on their orders without fearing that other companies could do that for them. The Norwegians are patriots – if they can, they hire Norwegian companies and Norwegian employees, even if it means a higher cost. As they say, it's good to be among your own kind.

When the crude oil prices started to drop, people began to worry. Those hired in the oil industry feared the prospect of losing their jobs and standing in a line for an unemployment benefit from NAV. Many people moved to other cities to look for a job. Does the construction industry also have reasons to worry about?

The Follo line is the largest railway project in Norwegian history. The Norwegian railway is one of the most modern in Europe. With 22 km of double-track railway, a new 64 km-long route, and a 20 km-long railway tunnel which is now the longest in Norway, the project aims to alleviate the rail congestion between Oslo S and Ski. You could say that the project is a source of national pride for the Norwegians. But is it really something they feel proud of? There's been a lot of speculation about it in the Internet and the media. The reason for that is that foreign companies have won tenders for major project works. The

largest contract in the country's history for laying new railway tracks was awarded to Italian companies. Why such a patriotic nation as the Norwegians has commissioned construction projects to foreign contractors?

Erik Smith, Manager of the Follo Line Project, admits that foreign companies offer better conditions, are better prepared, both technically and project-wise, and schedule the project work better. He had hoped that the invitation to tender would attract some interest among foreign contractors but he didn't expect that foreign tenderers would actually outnumber the domestic ones.

One of the companies bidding for the contract was Skanska, the Norwegian construction giant. Unfortunately, the decline of the company's tender offer will have implications. Many employees fear for their jobs. With fewer contracts and unsuccessful tender bids, some of the company's staff had to be made redundant or put on temporary layoff (*permittering*). The majority of projects in the construction industry are commissioned by the public sector which prefers to pay less for high quality work, and foreign companies are able to provide that.

In an interview given to FriFagbevegelse.no, a Skanska's representative admitted that he can understand the preference for cheaper labour



but does not consider it to be a good solution in the long run. Skanska has been pushed to the wall, and it has to choose who to make redundant. The company claims that it's going through temporary difficulties but are they really just temporary?

Norway is and always will be a multicultural country. Until it gets back on its feet and pull itself together, foreign companies will keep winning against domestic businesses because they try harder and are more determined. The Director of Communication at Skanska has assured us

that the company is ready to undertake large-scale projects and win major tenders because they know the Norwegian market and the local laws. Should they be worried?

When undertaking large-scale projects, Norway will continue to prefer cheaper labour, and the preparation and delivery times offered by foreign companies because these are crucial. Still, it will make sure that Norwegian companies start winning tenders. Perhaps they will be getting contracts for smaller projects but that's better than nothing.

Many who are first will be last, and the last first: Employee seniority and the order of dismissal

Anyone familiar with the Norwegian labour market will sooner or later become aware of the rule that when a company in Norway implements a redundancy programme, the first employees to go are those with the shortest seniority. Those on the top of the seniority list, on the other hand, are the last ones to leave the company. This article looks into the legal bases of this rule and the cases in which employees can successfully invoke it.

The legal bases and the common practice

It may come as a surprise but the Norwegian Labour Code (*Arbeidsmiljøloven*) does not mention seniority as a decisive factor that could justify dismissal or determine the order in which employees of different seniority should be made redundant when necessary.

Seniority is, however, one of the criteria (though an indirect one) in the collective agreement (the “Main Agreement”, *Hovedavtalen*) between the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the employers’ organisation NHO. Due to the significant role of trade unions and collective agreements in Norway, the seniority criterion is very often taken into account by employers, even if the employer is not formally bound by any collective agreement.

Section 8-2 of the 2014-2017 Main Agreement between LO and NHO reads as follows: “In the event of dismissal due to redundancy/re-

structuring, the seniority criterion may be waived if there are important reasons.

If, in connection with the redundancies being made, the company finds that there are important reasons why the seniority criterion should be waived, and employee representatives do not consider these reasons to be sufficiently significant/justified, this can be subject to negotiation between the organisations¹ (...”).

Based on the provision cited above, it is clear that companies indeed should take the seniority rule into account when giving notice of dismissal to the staff but they are allowed to disregard it in specific situations, as set out therein (“redundancies” + “important reasons”).

Therefore, companies bound by the Main Agreement between LO and NHO² and their affiliates should take seniority into account when determining the order of dismissal. However, if collective dismissals (redundancies) are be-

ing made and there are important reasons why more emphasis should be put on other criteria (e.g. the fact that an employee with shorter seniority has competencies that will be more useful to the company in a difficult situation, etc.), the employer is allowed to do that. However, if the employee(s) object to the decision, this may result in negotiations with trade unions and employers' organisations.

Another possibility is where the company is bound by an industry or local collective agreement where even more importance is given to seniority and/or where it is defined in more detail than in the Main Agreement between LO and NHO. However, do not expect that seniority will be the only significant criterion or that the company will not be allowed to determine the order of dismissal based on other pre-requisites (e.g. employee competencies).

If the employer is neither bound by the Main Agreement, nor any other collective agreement, seniority can still be taken into account as one of the decisive criteria used when determining the order of dismissal (but by no means the only one).

The company's practice can serve as a hint of how important the seniority criterion is for the company. If the employer used seniority as a key criterion during previous redundancies, the employees can expect that this will also be the case in the future, and raise this argument in potential negotiations.

Even if the employer is not bound by any collective agreement stipulating seniority or did not use seniority as a key criterion during previous redundancies, a complete disregard of seniority could be considered unjustified, as seen in Norwegian practice.

What difference in the employees' length of service is considered significant?

The purpose of using the seniority criterion during redundancies is to reward loyal employees for the years of good service to the company. Therefore, it should be assumed that seniority must be relatively long in order to contribute to the company's decision on dismissal.

This also applies to a situation where the employer needs to choose one employee over another. For the seniority criterion to be considered decisive or at least significant when determining

the order of dismissal, the difference in the employees' length of service also has to be considerable (usually more than a few years).

It should be noted that there is no written rule or firmly established practice which suggests how big the difference in the employees' length of service should be in order to be taken into account in the decision making process. The standard practice of the majority of the companies surveyed on this issue is that if none of the employees has neither been with the company for more than seven or eight years, nor is a recent hire, the seniority criterion is not even taken into account when deciding which staff members to dismiss and/or in what order.

If, on the other hand, an employee has worked for the company for fifteen to twenty years or more, he or she will typically have a much stronger position in the company compared to his/her colleagues with shorter seniority.

These are obviously average data. This means that there are both employers (not bound by any collective agreement) who consider seniority to be completely insignificant, and those who take "the first leaves last" principle literally, and will dismiss their staff in reversed order to that of hiring.

Norwegian judicial practice shows, on the other hand, that the difference in the employees' seniority needs to be approximately ten to fifteen years in order to be successfully invoked by an employee seeking to have the dismissal deemed unlawful.

How is seniority calculated? Interrupted employment

The method for calculating seniority can be defined in the contract between the employer and the employee or in a collective agreement (if the company is bound by it).

If the company is not bound by any collective agreement and the method for calculating the length of service is not defined by any provision of the contract of employment, it should be assumed that the length of service is equivalent to the duration of uninterrupted employment in the company (sick leave, paternal leave and other types of non-working time regulated by the labour law do not interrupt continuity of employment).

Things become more complicated when an

employee leaves the company (after the expiry or termination of the contract of employment), and is re-hired at a later date. Should the length of service be calculated from the beginning of the employee's first employment at the company or from the most recent one?

The most important criteria here are whether the employee worked for other companies in the meantime, and the reasons for the interruption. If the employer asked the employee specifically to terminate the contract and promised that he or she would be re-hired later or simply dismissed the employee due to reasons attributable to the company and then re-hired him/her, the length of service should be calculated from the date of the first employment.

The same applies to a situation where the employee was asked by the employer to move to another company owned by the same group or person, etc. In these situations, the length of service should be calculated cumulatively.

If the interruption resulted from the fact that the employee wanted to try out something new and quit (especially if he or she worked for another employer in the meantime), the length of service at the company, as a general rule, should be calculated from the date of the last employment.

The duration of the gaps in between the two employments can be an additional criterion: if the gap was short (not exceeding a few months), it would be justified to calculate the length of service from the date of the first employment.

If there are no explicit provisions in the contract of employment or any collective agreement binding upon the employer, all of these factors should be considered jointly.

Negotiations. A case in court

If an employee believes that there are grounds for the termination to be deemed unlawful based on the seniority criterion, he or she may demand negotiations with the employer (if the company is bound by a collective agreement, the employee may also request mediation from an employee representative (*tillitsvalgt*)) or file a claim against the employer, as stipulated in § 17-3 of the labour law (*arbeidsmiljøloven*).

For as long as the negotiations are ongoing, the employee maintains his/her right to continue working.

A demand for negotiations should be submitted in writing no later than within two weeks from receipt of the notice of termination.

Where appropriate, a claim should be filed within eight weeks from termination of the negotiations. If no negotiations were held, the claim should be filed within eight weeks from receipt of the notice of termination.

If an employee wishes to claim damages for unlawful dismissal, he or she may file a claim within six months from receipt of the notice of termination.

The right to continue working until the final judgement is delivered shall remain in force provided that the claim was filed within eight weeks from termination of the negotiations or receipt of the notice of termination, and that it took place prior to the expiry of the notice period, or, alternatively, if the employee informed the employer in writing of his/her intention to file a claim within the eight-weeks' period prior to the expiry of the notice period.

In special cases, the employer may request that the court revoke the employee's right to continue working while the dispute is being investigated.

The right to demand negotiations and the right to file a claim must be included in the written notice of termination given by the employer; otherwise they will be null and void. If this information is not included in the notice of termination, the termination is considered unlawful, and if the employee files a claim against the employer, he or she can be almost certain to win the case.

References:

Hovedavtalen LO-NHO - www.lo.no

Arbeidsmiljøloven - lovdata.no

Nils H. Storeng, Tom H. Beck, Arve Due Lund, *Arbeidslivets spilleregler*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 2011.

1. I.e. trade unions and employers' organisations.

2. Both LO and NHO have access to the lists of companies bound by these provisions. Information on whether a company is bound by a collective agreement can be usually obtained from the employee representative (*tillitsvalgt*) or the spokesperson of the health and safety committee (*verneombud*).

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European Economic Area (EEA) Grants and Norway Grants – What are they?

Many of us have either heard about EEA Grants and Norway Grants or seen their logos on promotional materials. What do they involve and how to take advantage of the opportunities they offer?

European Economic Area (EEA) Grants and Norway Grants are a form of financial aid offered by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway to reduce economic and social disparities in the European Economic Area (EEA) and to strengthen bilateral relations between European Union/EEA countries.

Where did the idea come from?

Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway have supported the idea of eliminating disparities in the EEA since 1994. The enlargements of the European Union in 2004 and 2007 brought a 20% increase in the EU's population but only a 5% increase in GDP. The objective of the EEA Grants and Norway Grants is to reduce disparities and strengthen bilateral relations between European countries. These initiatives bring mutual benefits for both the donor and beneficiary countries. The grant scheme promotes partnership and networking (an exchange of information, resources and mutual support), and provides extensive support to bilateral projects between organisations in the donor and beneficiary countries.

Where does the funding come from?

EEA Grants and Norway Grants are set up for five-year periods. Projects financed with the

funds appropriated for the 2009-2014 period can be implemented until 2016.

EEA Grants are jointly financed by Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. Of the EUR 993 million of aid funding available in 2009-2014, Norway provided 95.8%, Iceland 3.0%, and Liechtenstein 1.2%. Norway Grants are financed by Norway alone. In 2009-2014, a total of EUR 804 million were provided.

Who are the grants addressed to?

To ensure optimal allocation of the funds between the 16 beneficiary countries, a total of 150 aid programmes were created in 32 categories. The amount of funding provided to individual countries is based on population size and GDP per capita, making Poland, Romania, Hungary and the Czech Republic the largest beneficiary states.

Currently, the main goal of the grant scheme is to support the environment and sustainability by financing measures aimed at fighting climate change and supporting eco-friendly industrial solutions. Other key areas include health, education, civil society, justice and social dialogue.

Grants are available to local and regional governments, non-governmental organisations,

research and academic institutions, as well as private and public sector bodies, and public and private initiatives.

The Programmes

The needs and priorities in each of the 16 supported countries are different. The programmes are divided into the following areas:

1. Environmental protection and management
 - integrated marine and inland water management;
 - biodiversity and ecosystems;
 - environmental monitoring and integrated planning and control;
 - reduction of hazardous substances;
2. Climate change and renewable energy
 - energy efficiency;
 - renewable energy;
 - adaptation to climate change;
 - environmental and climate change-related research and technology;
3. Civil society
4. Human and social development
 - children and youth at risk;
 - local and regional initiatives to reduce national inequalities and promote social inclusion;
 - public health initiatives;
 - mainstreaming gender equality and promoting work-life balance;
 - capacity-building and institutional cooperation with Norwegian public institutions, and local and regional authorities;
 - cross-border cooperation;
5. Protecting cultural heritage
 - conservation and revitalisation of cultural and natural heritage;
 - promotion of diversity in culture and arts within European cultural heritage;
6. Research and scholarship
 - research within priority sectors / bilateral research cooperation;
 - scholarship / bilateral scholarship cooperation;

7. Carbon capture and storage

8. Green Industry Innovation

9. Decent work and tripartite dialogue

10. Justice and home affairs

- domestic and gender-based violence;
- Schengen cooperation and combating cross-border and organised crime, including trade and mobile crime groups;
- judicial capacity-building and cooperation;
- correctional services, including non-custodial sanctions

How and when to apply?

Grants are normally allocated through the publication of calls for proposals. Proposals must be submitted to the relevant programme operator within a scheduled deadline and meet the clearly defined conditions. A grant will not necessarily cover the entirety of the project costs, and some level of co-financing may be required. Grants are not awarded for projects that have already been completed.

Key support targets in Poland:

- maximise energy efficiency;
- promote green innovations in collaboration with Norwegian companies;
- enhance environmental monitoring and protection of biodiversity;
- improve access to public healthcare;
- broaden research collaboration between Norway and Poland;
- contribute to improving efficiency of the judicial system.

Many companies and institutions have already taken advantage of the EEA Grants and Norway Grants. Although much has already been done thanks to the funding provided, there are still many possibilities to take advantage of the grant funds. Information on programmes currently being implemented in Poland is available at: www.eeagrants.org

References:

www.eeagrants.org

Occupational health service units (Bedriftshelsetjeneste)

Who is required to establish an OHS unit or to have an agreement with an existing one? *Bedriftshelsetjeneste* (BHT) or occupational health service units (OHS units) must exist in certain industries where workers may face increased workplace risks.

The provisions regulating OHS are laid down in § 3-3. *Bedriftshelsetjeneste* of the Norwegian Work Environment Act (*Arbeidsmiljøloven*), as well as in § 13-1 of the Regulations on Organisation, Management and Employee Participation (*Forskrift om organisering ledelse og medvirkning*).

Workplace risks include diseases, injuries, accidents, and high levels of mental stress. There is a special list of industry groups which should be linked to an occupational health service unit (approved by the Labour Inspection Authority). The Labour Inspection Authority may require a company to establish cooperation with an OHS unit if the company's working conditions are found to meet the criteria for it, even if the company is not part of the industry group required to run its own OHS unit.

The employer is responsible for occupational health and safety, and the company must be linked to an OHS unit (i.e. is required to cooperate with an OHS unit). The role of an OHS unit is to provide the employer with the necessary support (for instance, by providing suggestions on how to improve safety within the workplace). An OHS unit may take an independent position on matters related to workplace safety.

Organisation of OHS units

There are two ways of providing occupational health services to a company:

- a company can establish its own OHS unit (the unit needs to be recognised by the Labour Inspection Authority);
- a company can enter into an agreement with an existing OHS unit which provides services to many businesses, e.g. in a specific industry.

Possible uses of OHS by employer

As provided for in § 13-2 of the Regulations on Organisation, Management and Employee Participation, the employer must ensure (through a relevant OHS unit) that certain measures are implemented in the company. The most important ones include:

- Support with the assessment of the work environment and health risks;
- Support with the criteria for the use of machinery, equipment, and processes at the workplace, as well as handling of chemicals;
- Support with the planning or implementation of changes in the company (including the creation, maintenance and adaptation of facilities, jobs, equipment and processes);
- Consultations on the preventive measures suggested to minimize the risk of injury;



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- Support with the control of employee health;
- Implementation of the necessary corrective measures;
- Provision of the necessary information or training on significant risks and appropriate measures to prevent such risks;
- Support to adapt the workplace in accordance with the company's needs, where appropriate;
- Support with addressing questions from the workplace environment and safety advisor, delegates, and employees.

Also, the employer participates (jointly with the OHS unit) in drawing up plans, annual reports, and notifications regarding:

- employee health status;
- work environment and safety within the workplace;
- test results;
- identification of existing risks (e.g. noise levels, light, chemicals, dust, air conditioning, ventilation, dangerous equipment, and many others).

The documentation should include a description of unhealthful working conditions, proposed mitigation measures, and a report on the results of the preventive measures that have been implemented. With the support from the OHS unit, the employer should also plan measures to be taken in the following months.

The company's OHS unit can help the employer plan processes at the workplace, as well

as provide support with other issues, including conflicts between employees. An OHS unit can also help the employer create new workstations, purchase new equipment, and provide training on working techniques.

What you need to remember

Many companies are required to either establish their own OHS unit or enter into an agreement with an existing one. Bear in mind that OHS is not provided free of charge: an agreement with an OHS unit involves a cost for the employer so make sure you get something in return. It is important to be aware of the areas where the cooperation with an OHS unit can contribute to the improvement of the company's operations, productivity and competitiveness. For further information, please contact Polish Connection Sp. z o.o. or the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority (*Arbeidstilsynet*) directly.

References:

- www.arbeidstilsynet.no
- 1. The Work Environment Act, (*Arbeidsmiljøloven*), § 3-3. *Bedriftshelsetjeneste*
- 2. Regulations on Organisation, Management and Employee Participation (*Forskrift om organisering ledelse og medvirkning, Kapittel 13*). *Bedriftshelsetjeneste (§§ 13-1 - 13-3)*.

What industries are currently hiring in Norway?

The crude oil crisis has been felt acutely in Norway. Over the last year, the unemployment rate rose from 3.7% to 4.6% (between November 2014 and November 2015). Even though this is still a low figure compared to other European countries (for example, in Q3 2015, the unemployment rate in Poland was as high as 9.7%, according to the Central Statistical Office of Poland [GUS]), Norwegian analysts are concerned by this trend.

The price for a barrel of oil remains historically low, leading to declining competitiveness of the Norwegian economy in the world market, with the extractive industries representing 20% of the country's economic output.

Until recently, the extractive and shipbuilding industries provided plenty of job opportunities, and skilled workers from Poland gladly filled the vacancies. After major shipyards in Poland had closed, experienced welders, assemblers, pipelayers and scaffolders were able to fairly easily find employment at Norwegian shipyards and oil platforms. In 2015, the situation changed dramatically: many work contracts expired, and employees started to be put on temporary layoff (known as *permittering* in Norway, i.e. a temporary suspension of an employment contract due to lack of work) or made redundant. According to the data available from the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), the number of people registered as unemployed between February 2015 and February 2016 rose by 11%, while the number of temporarily laid-off employees increased by an astounding 22%.

The statistics show that the occupations with the largest number of job openings in Q3 2015 in Norway included social workers and social assistance providers, followed by healthcare professionals, teachers, public administration workers, sales staff and construction workers. These are currently the top sectors for job seekers.

Europe's population is aging, and life expectancy has been increasing (the average life expectancy in Norway is 76 for males, and 82 for females). The demand for healthcare professionals and social assistance workers is likely to be driven by the country's demographics. The growing number of job openings in the public administration sector (e.g. NAV), on the other hand, may be due to the fact that more staff are needed to process applications for unemployment and temporary layoff benefits or to verify the applicants' eligibility for them.

It needs to be stressed that in all industries priority is given to candidates with strong qualifications (professional education and experience) and foreign language skills. Even though a vast majority of Norwegians speak English, a good



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command of this language may not be enough for a foreigner to find employment in Norway. The command of Norwegian, even if only at a conversational level, is essential in the services and healthcare industries. Although this requirement may be hard to meet, it is fully understandable why employers are seeking it. Norwegians want to be provided with services in their own language, and it's the migrants who need to adapt to the employment conditions, and not the other way round.

The offering of Norwegian language courses in Poland is truly impressive. Learning Norwegian is a great investment in your future if you are seriously thinking about finding a job in the land of the fjords.

Some of the sites for job seekers in Norway are www.finn.no/jobb (available in Norwegian only), NAV Servicenter EURES (available from Monday to Friday from 08:00 AM to 03:30 PM at +47 754 26 404), or industry websites.

You are also encouraged to download a short guidebook for job seekers in Norway available at www.polishconnection.no.

References:

1. Data of the Central Statistical Office of Poland (GUS): www.stat.gov.pl
2. www.nav.no
3. www.ssb.no
4. www.dinside.no



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