

Buying in to a better future

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Circular principles are well embedded in the Municipality of Kolding. But that wasn't always the case. In fact, not that long ago the municipal organisation was doing little more than exploring some of the basic ideas about the circular economy. So how did they manage to go from a state of near ignorant bliss to becoming one of the country's frontrunners in the field? And how did they get their employees and other stakeholders to buy into it? Kim Ankjær Nielsen, Project Manager in Circular Economy and in charge of the circular procurement project of ProCirc Interreg North Sea Region for the municipality's waste department, takes us on his municipality's journey to becoming a more circular organisation as he explores these questions with us.

Denmark is a small country. Most municipalities there have a fair idea of what the other ones are doing and how well they're performing. That's why, when the Waste Management Department of the Municipality of Kolding wanted to explore possibilities of integrating circular principles into its operations, it decided to look further afield for inspiration. 'We thought it would be a good idea to work with players that were ahead of us in this game,' says Nielsen. Which is how they ended up being a project partner and doing experimental circular pilots projects in ProCirc Interreg North Sea Region.

According to Nielsen, being part of a European project was a steep learning curve. There are many skilled people working in the other participating organisations in the project. 'We really felt the pressure to perform well in this project,' says Nielsen. 'But it was positive pressure. My organisation normally wouldn't have told me to allocate 40% of my time to pushing the circular agenda in procurement. We report to Interreg on this project, however, so we have to deliver.'

It was also a golden opportunity to spar with international peers. 'There's always a frontrunner in another project who's willing to give you input when you have a problem. We've benefitted a lot from that. It's interesting because you can go from simply having some ideas and ambitions about circularity, to becoming part of a project, and suddenly, three years later, you're somewhat of a frontrunner yourself.'

From a simple project to a paradigm shift

The Municipality of Kolding's waste vehicle pilot with ProCirc aims to replace vehicles running on fossil fuels with ones using a greener alternative, for example hydrogen or electricity. 'It was a simple pilot to begin with,' says Nielsen. 'Take one vehicle that runs on fossil fuels and buy a new one that doesn't. But considering the whole process we're going through to introduce circular thinking – the learning phase, the culture change, the different mindset – it didn't make sense to experiment with only one vehicle.'

As a result, the pilot has evolved from being about the replacement of a single vehicle to making a paradigm shift. 'Now we're planning to substitute all of our vehicles for greener alternatives. The only question is: how do we go about it? Because we still have a responsibility to collect household waste. So we can't replace all of our trucks overnight. After all, if the new trucks were flawed in any way that would bring waste collection to a halt.'

Instead, we're in the process of a paradigm shift about circular thinking that will gradually but surely take hold.' Of course, you need your employees to buy into the idea for it to succeed.

Three ways to create buy-in

Keep it simple

Most of us are reluctant to change. So how does a project manager working for a municipality break the news that you're going circular? 'First, we talked to our employees. We asked them what their biggest fears are when they hear the word circular.' Initially, they felt it was all too academic and difficult to grasp. Some feared it may have a negative impact on their job situation. 'So our first task was to translate the concept of circularity into something simple. And explain to our employees that circularity is something they may already be doing in their work without knowing it.'

Nielsen began by using eight icons representing circular economy principles, which were inspired by the Dutch organisation Circle Economy (see also the box on the Icebreaker, a tool based on these icons and principles). He used them in projects and in internal newsletters to highlight instances where someone in his organisation was already doing something that supported the circular transition.

Examples include phasing out fossil fuels or extending the life of a product. 'At one point, our foreman in the logistics department had an idea that supported circularity, though he wasn't aware of it,' Nielsen recalls. 'Containers were randomly distributed in the logistics area, so drivers had to drive the trucks around looking for the containers first before they could pick them up. The foreman streamlined the system by numbering the containers and giving them a fixed place.'

Though a simple idea, it reduced the amount of time trucks had their engines running and their wheels turning on their axes, thus decreasing emissions and increasing the longevity of the vehicles. 'It's important for us to highlight these examples so people are aware they're already contributing to the circular transition. And then we need to build on that foundation.'

Create ownership

Another way of getting employee buy-in is giving them a sense of ownership. For example, in the past, if procurers needed a new waste collection truck, they would talk to players in the market and find the truck they wanted for the right price. Circular principles would not have been a concern. As it's an expensive purchase, however, they need to get the green light from the director. Imagine this director were to tell the procurer at this late stage that he or she needed to factor in a circular ambition. 'This was clearly not the right way to go about it,' Nielsen says. 'The procurer has spent a lot of time choosing the right truck and needs to have it by next month. The last thing we want is to be a barrier in their procurement process.'

As a result, Nielsen and his team decided that they all need to sit together at a much earlier stage, when the budgets for these types of purchases are being drawn up. 'Procurers usually

know well ahead of time when they'll need a new truck, as much as a year or two in advance. So now we analyse the situation first and identify what kind of circular principles would be interesting to integrate into the procurement process. Then we present those options to the procurers and put them in charge of deciding what to go with. This creates a sense of ownership, as opposed to us just dictating what to do.'

Spread the word

Buy-in is not a strictly internal affair. Just as Nielsen's organisation learned from more experienced partners in the ProCirc ecosystem, he too is spreading the word to other municipalities. 'Throughout this project, as a waste management department, we've been thinking about how we extend what we've learned during the project to at least the wider municipal level. We're in touch with a national forum for sustainable procurement, for example, and get a lot of requests to make presentations about circular procurement now. I think that's the foundation of these European projects: share knowledge across borders, but also between municipalities and regions nationally.'

Interviewee

[Kim Ankjær Nielsen](#), Project Manager in Circular Economy and leader of the circular procurement transition, Kolding Municipality, Denmark.

Icebreaker

The Icebreaker tool came to life from discussions with the Waste Management Maintenance Department of the Municipality of Kolding. Kim Ankjær Nielsen and the Circular Economy Team, in charge of the circular procurement transition, asked employees in the department what they would need if they had to integrate circular principles into their procurement process. One of the answers was a checklist tool. 'When we ask those responsible for the actual transition to more circular procurement and for buying the trucks and containers and other items, they tell us they want something simple. It has to be appealing and inviting to work with, something you can hang on the wall. What they don't want is another 70-page roadmap,' says Nielsen.

Click on the image to view at full size

ICEBREAKER

A Tool for Basic Circular Procurement Potentials

Rethink	Reuse	Prioritize	Integrate	Preserve	Cooperate	Design
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The product can be leased for a given period The product can be rented as 'pay per use' The product can be 'bought as a service' ('products as a service') The product can be procured with an included take-back scheme to maximize the suppliers circular interests The need to be satisfied can be fulfilled by an existing product in the organization or by another more sustainable alternative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The product can be procured as reuse/secondhand and it makes sense to do so There is an existing product in the organization that can be slightly modified for the task At a later stage the product can be sold at a price for reuse (maybe with some preparation for reuse) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The product is produced at factories running solely on renewable energy sources (wind, solar, rainwater, geothermal etc.) The product is produced at factories running partly on renewable energy sources (wind, solar, rainwater, geothermal etc.) The product is made from renewable material(s) (e.g. from wood or other natural renewable sources) The product is made from "healthy" materials i.e. materials containing no harmful substances (e.g. to humans or environment) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital technology and/or data collection can be integrated (e.g. for mapping, usage and maintenance optimization, accessibility, positioning, wear, material content etc) The user of the product should be trained to a certain extend in order to maximize correct use and minimal wear and damage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The product lifespan can be prolonged non-technologically through reducing mileage, kWh use, and general wear The product is financially sustainably repairable and maintainable The product is post-procurement upgradable to satisfy changing needs in the future The product has a warranty for minimum life expectancy The product has a warranty for spare parts accessibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I should cooperate with the users in mapping their needs to be able to match the right product with the true needs of the users I should bring in circular procurement experts to analyze for further circular potentials/requirements I should create a market dialogue and cooperate with the market about realizing circular potentials based on user needs The product, production and transportation methods live up to the organization's overall vision for sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The product is pre-procurement customizable to be able to fit precisely with user needs and intended use The product is designed for disassembly allowing for recycling at end of life or repair and modification during product life The product is produced from recycled material At end of life the product can be recycled because it is made from recyclable materials

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