

CREATING HEALTHIER AND SAFER WORKING CONDITIONS FOR ALL EMPLOYEES: BULGARIA

1. Organisations involved

- Zlatna Panega Cement AD, Bulgaria
- DuPont consultants

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

Zlatna Panega Cement AD, Bulgaria, is a leading cement manufacturer in Bulgaria. Since 2004, it has formed part of the Greek TITAN Group, which employs more than 5,500 people worldwide.

Zlatna Panega Cement AD itself has 226 employees. Of the 59 workers aged over 50 years old, 32.2% work in production processes, 39% in maintenance and 28.8% in administration.

As part of the TITAN Group, the company follows a code of conduct about equality and corporate social responsibility. As part of this, the management is committed to maintaining the health of its workers.

The policy and measures targeting older employees are integrated into the company's health and safety policy. Appropriate working conditions for older employees are identified and measures taken to ensure compliance with health and safety requirements.

At the end of 2008, the company implemented the health and safety project 'Step Change' in association with the consulting firm DuPont.

2.2. Aims

The 'Step Change' project focuses on step-by-step occupational health and safety improvements in the organisation. Incremental changes to health and safety parameters and the creation of a health promotion culture will ensure a safer and healthier workplace for workers of all ages. In addition, as part of the project, special measures were created to retain the expertise of older employees.

2.3. What was done, and how?

'Step Change' was initiated by the management of the TITAN Group. It was implemented in Zlatna Panega Cement AD with the support of the plant's management, the health and safety department, representatives of the workers and DuPont consultants.

A set of policies were put in place, focusing on continuous improvement of occupational safety and health performance, risk assessment, prevention of work accidents and illnesses, and workplace health promotion. While the policies encompassed all employees, most of the activities and measures were of particular benefit for older employees.

2.3.1. General health protection and promotion measures

Immediately following the project launch to all employees, a thorough health and safety audit was carried out. A special commission created an action plan for that purpose, establishing a central safety committee, along with 15 subcommittees. Specific actions included:

- Establishing a regular risk assessment procedure, with special emphasis on the work environment of older employees. Such assessments should take into account the impact of age on functional capacities, and the health of personnel.

- Establishing a health commission and a five-year plan for health promotion. This plan made provision for employee health improvements and workplace health promotion.
- Regular, preventative medical checks and full medical examinations for employees. In recent years, medical check-ups have been expanded to include musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) and lung spirometry.
- Covering the rehabilitation costs for workers who had experienced serious illness and/or occupational disease.

2.3.2. Measures for older employees

Older employees are valued for their experience, motivation and punctuality, as well as for their ability to share their experiences and knowledge with younger colleagues. A special policy targeting older employees was designed to protect these valuable older employees through:

- Risk assessment of the working environments of older employees to identify specific measures and adaptations to make them more suitable.
- Measures to prevent age-related physical and physiological work-related health problems:
 - *Sight*: As many of the older employees have sight problems, special attention is paid to lighting. Light levels are assessed annually to ensure they remain within acceptable parameters. Workers with sight problems are compensated for buying glasses.
 - *MSDs*: The work environments of administrative workers are designed to protect employees' sight and prevent MSDs. Those who work with video displays are provided with ergonomic working stations.
 - *Physiological factors*: The company's regime of work and rest periods has been adapted for the type of work and the age-related physiological needs of the employee. For instance, older employees working outside in the warm summer and cold winter have access to rooms with comfortable conditions for rest, as well as suitable drinks.
- Active ageing measures and workplace health promotion. Although open to all employees, these initiatives are most popular among the senior employees. Activities include:
 - *weekly training on health protection and health promotion topics (for example manual handling of loads, harmful impact of alcohol and tobacco use, promotion of healthy lifestyles, healthy eating patterns, 'moving for health' and other sport initiatives);*
 - *training on health issues specifically for processing and maintenance workers, such as MSD prevention, the cardiovascular system, diseases of the digestive system, diabetes, sight and hearing;*
 - *provision of healthy and balanced nutrition in the company canteen, with discounted healthy meals available.*

2.3.3. General communication measures and training

The management aims to achieve better occupational safety and health conditions, reduce occupational risks and provide continuous training and motivation to achieve work with zero accidents. This objective is clearly communicated to staff.

- A series of specialised training and coaching activities were developed for top managers, line managers and employees.
- Information and training materials, manuals, fact sheets and video presentations related to safety and health were developed and distributed.
- Upward communication is valued and encouraged. All personnel were trained and encouraged to uncover and report unsafe and unhealthy practices and procedures in operations (near miss ⁽¹⁾ reporting system). Every near miss reported leads to further hazard identification and the creation

⁽¹⁾ A near miss is an unplanned event that did not result in injury, illness, or damage, but had the potential to do so.

of specific measures that improve safety at work. Older employees are actively involved because of their knowledge and experience.

2.3.4. Measures for improving the wellbeing of employees

With most of the employees from neighbouring towns and villages, the company provides free transport for its employees to and from work. The company also provides life insurance, supplementary pension insurance, regular company-funded medical examination and treatment, bonuses at retirement, discounted food in the company canteen, etc.

2.4. What was achieved?

The most important achievements include the following:

- The work environment and wellbeing of employees of all ages have been improved.
- All work places, including those of older workers, are assessed regularly and adjusted to their needs. Better working conditions assure older employees that they are valued.
- The 'zero accident' goal was achieved and, in December 2013, the company reported 4 years without any lost time injury. There has been a consistent decrease in the sick leave rate, suggesting an improvement in overall employee health. The level of morbidity of older employees is also decreasing, with lower reported levels of MSDs.
- The former top-down control has been changed into a trust-based system with a focus on safety results. A collaborative safety culture was created within the company through two-way communication, resulting in increasing workers' engagement with their own and others' safety.
- The company has a reputation for leading the field in the cement industry. For 4 years in a row (2010–2013), Zlatna Panega Cement has received the General Labour Inspectorate – Executive Agency's national award for occupational health and safety. In December 2013, the company was awarded the special award for comprehensive and sustainable health and safety policy.
- The company participated in the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations 2012 in Bulgaria and was commended for its health and safety policy for older employees.

The need to change safety culture was identified as the most significant barrier to this project. Management and occupational safety and health staff in the company found that the greatest amount of effort was expended in changing employees' mindsets to instil safe behaviour and encourage employees to follow the safety practices and take responsibility for their actions.

2.5. Success factors

The following factors contributed to the success of the 'Step Change' project:

- *Involvement of top management:* Strong, visible commitment from top managers and line managers made safety and health a core value and an integral part of business strategy.
- *Involvement of workers:* Employee engagement with the project resulted in increased knowledge, shared commitment and better motivation of employees.
- *Specific measures for older workers:* Whereas certain measures improved the working conditions of all workers, others specifically targeted older workers.
- *Awareness-raising activities:* Regular two-way communication, the distribution of information material and trained workers and managers helped to create a safety culture.
- *Dedicated staff:* Experienced occupational safety and health personnel were available to support the project.

2.6. Transferability

The practice is transferable to all companies irrespective of their size and sector. European and national policy on active ageing means that measures targeting older workers form a necessary part of workplace safety and health initiatives.

Zlatna Panega Cement management and its health and safety department have led discussions during 'safety days' and conferences, to support an accident-free culture within and beyond the cement industry. In line with this goal, its safety practices have already been extended beyond the company gates to include its subcontractors, suppliers and distributors.

2.7. Further information

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3. References and resources

- Interview with Veselina Donkova Kirilova, Head of Health and Safety Department
- Website of the company: <http://www.titan.bg/the-company.html>
- Information and policy documents: <http://www.titan.bg/news.html> and <http://www.titan.bg/corporate-social-responsibility/content/health-and-safety.html>