

SUSTAINABLE PHYSICAL WORK NETWORK (THE NETHERLANDS)

Type of initiative: Network

Timeframe: 2014 - present

1 Description of the initiative

1.1 Introduction

In 2011, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment launched a campaign on sustainable employability, with the aim of creating more productive and sustainable workplaces through raising awareness among employers and employees about sustainable employability and about the importance of investing in the employee's health, lifelong learning and working conditions. In 2014, the campaign expanded to include psychosocial risks and work-related stress. Over time, the responsibility for sustainable employability has shifted from the ministry to social partners at all levels, and to the company level in particular. Although the sustainable employability project concluded at the end of 2017, the ministry continues to pay attention to this issue, providing training in areas such as lifelong learning, physical and mental health, and safety in the workplace. The ministry also provides information related to the topic on its website on sustainable employability.

One of the initiatives of the campaign was the establishment of the Sustainable Physical Work Network, the aim of which is to share knowledge, experience and best practice in tackling the issue of physically demanding work. The network has been financed through the social programme on working conditions, implemented by the Netherlands' Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO) on behalf of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

1.2 Aim of the initiative

The initiative aims to promote safety and health at work through a bottom-up process of sharing knowledge of effective initiatives and measures implemented by organisations and companies. The overall aims are to promote sustainable employability by supporting organisations in reducing and managing physical workload in a responsible manner and to prevent absenteeism.

1.3 Organisations involved

The network is an initiative of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the TNO and the Office for Physical Work. Participation in the network is open to any organisation or company where physically demanding work could pose a health risk, including those in the healthcare, automotive, manufacturing, energy and logistics sectors, as well as educational institutions and government organisations.

It is financed through the National Social Programme on Working Conditions (MAPA), implemented by the TNO on behalf of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.

1.4 What was done and how

The Sustainable Physical Work Network was initiated in 2014. The network is intended for organisations that want to tackle physical workload and it works according to the pay-it-forward principle. Companies share their knowledge and experience in tackling physical workload with other companies free of charge through an online platform. The website also provides links to various checklists and tools to assess risks from physical workload, prevention advice and the Guide to Physical Load, a tool providing a structured approach to prevention in five steps.

The network publishes a newsletter four times a year, including information on new campaigns and sectoral meetings. The newsletter also describes good practice examples, success factors and how challenges were overcome, as does the network website (see <https://www.fysiekebelasting.tno.nl/nl/praktijkvoorbeelden/> for good practices by sector).

The examples cover a broad range of topics, such as addressing the risks of prolonged sitting through a new layout of the office, increasing fitness and physical capacity of workers through a personal training program, considering ergonomic optimization when designing workplaces, or technical solutions / aids to decrease physical workload.

At pay-it-forward meetings, regularly organised by the network to share knowledge and experiences, companies present their approach and solutions to tackle physical workload and offer a guided tour around the workplace. Workers share their experiences too, allowing companies and sectors to learn from one another and replicate what works well. Topics at pay-it-forward meetings have included sustainable physical work in ambulance care, by Ambulance Care Groningen; learning about the prevention of MSDs at Océ, a printing company; and sustainable physical work, at ENGIE Centrale Prefabricage in Dordrecht.

1.5 What was achieved

Since 2014, around 650 companies from various sectors and of various size have connected with one another, and this number is growing. Any organisation can subscribe to the newsletter, and it has a substantial outreach. The practical results of the network are less easy to quantify, as its added value lies in awareness raising, exchange of information for others' benefit, and encouraging new initiatives to reduce physical workload and — eventually — reduce costs for organisations by promoting sustainable employability.

Results of the National Research into Sustainable Employment 2018 survey show a growing awareness of sustainable employability, with 59 % of respondents stating that the topic is on the strategic agenda of their organisations. However, only 21 % of respondents believe that senior management takes sufficient action, and the issue remains a matter of concern for many organisations. All sectors were represented in the survey, with most respondents being employed by the government (18%) and in the healthcare and welfare sector (17 %), followed by business services (12 %) and the industry and energy sector (11 %). Almost half (46 %) of the respondents work in organisations with more than 500 workers, 26 % in organisations with 101-500 employees, 17 % in organisations with 21-100 employees and the remaining 11 % in small organisations with fewer than 20 employees.

1.6 Success factors and challenges

The pay-it-forward principle is based on reciprocity and continuous growth. The network has grown substantially in recent years. The diversity of the network is an important asset. Sharing knowledge and experience also helps in that it enables participants to identify practical solutions that are relevant to their own sector of work.

Keeping this issue on the political agenda remains a challenge, as does encouraging employers to continue investing in the vitality and employability of their work force, and raising employee awareness of the signs and consequences of physical and psychosocial overload.

1.7 Transferability

The initiative has the potential to be transferable to other Member States, as the risk of physical overload or lack of physical activity at work is not country specific. The network is diverse, thus the information on the website (including on preventive measures) relates to a wide range of sectors. This makes it a valuable resource for organisations facing similar challenges or implementing similar measures. Employers often find it difficult to relate solutions from one sector to their own work (even where they could be applicable), so the development of a pool of ideas could be a valuable asset.

2 Background

National legislation implementing the Manual Handling and Display Screen Equipment Directives contains essentially the same provisions as those in the directives, with the small exception that breaks from display screen equipment work have to be taken after not more than 2 consecutive hours.

Employers are legally obliged to make a risk inventory and evaluation relating to risks present in their workplace (including psychosocial risks) and to draw up a plan to indicate how they propose to tackle those risks.

In the Netherlands, there are strong financial incentives for employers to prevent accidents and negative health outcomes from work. The Civil Code stipulates that in the case of illness of an employee the employer must pay at least 70 % (and no less than the minimum wage) of the worker's wage for 2 years (104 weeks).

In the Dutch occupational safety and health system, social dialogue has a prominent role. The legal basis for the social dialogue is the Working Conditions Act, which states that a safe and healthy workplace is the combined responsibility of employers and employees. This stimulates social dialogue at all levels: enterprise, sector and national levels.

References and resources

- (1) TNO, 'Frequently asked questions'. Available at: <https://www.fysiekebelasting.tno.nl/en/faq-2/>
- (2) TNO, 'Netwerk Duurzaam Fysiek Werk: Pay it forward!' Available at: <https://www.fysiekebelasting.tno.nl/nl/netwerk-duurzaam-fysiek-werk/>
- (3) TNO, 'Factsheet on physical load' (*Factsheet fysieke belasting 2018*). Available at: <https://www.monitorarbeid.tno.nl/publicaties/factsheet-fysieke-belasting-2018>
- (4) TNO, 2018, 'Report on sustainable employability in the Netherlands' (*Rapport Duurzame Inzetbaarheid in Nederland*). Available at: https://www.monitorarbeid.tno.nl/dynamics/modules/SFIL0100/view.php?fil_Id=237
- (5) CODI (Cohortonderzoek duurzame inzetbaarheid), 2017, 'Factsheet'. Available at: https://www.monitorarbeid.tno.nl/dynamics/modules/SPUB0102/view.php?pub_Id=100590&att_Id=4911
- (6) Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 'Op weg naar duurzame inzetbaarheid'. Available at: <http://www.duurzameinzetbaarheid.nl/>
- (7) Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment website, online platform: <http://www.duurzameinzetbaarheid.nl/1338/Praktijkverhalen.html>,
- (8) 'Analysis of national research into sustainable employability 2018' (*Analyse Nationaal Onderzoek Duurzame Inzetbaarheid 2018*). Available at: https://factorvijf.eu/wp-content/uploads/WP_PW_April_2018_v2.pdf.
- (9) Contacted stakeholder representative: Marjolein Douwes, TNO.

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