



PARTNERSHIPS ON HEALTH PROMOTION AND WORK ENVIRONMENT IMPROVEMENT

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▪ *Abstract*

Issue

The creation of a network of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) was established, with the aim to enhance the capacity of smaller sized organisations to implement workplace health promotion (WHP) activities and make improvements to the work environment.

Action

A network was created between 11 public and private companies, the Danish municipality of Esbjerg, the Danish National Heart Association, and the Danish Work Environment Council. The aim of the

network was to enhance the capacity of the participating companies to implement WHP and work environment improvements.

Results

The creation of the network was successful. It provided a basis for mutual learning and inspiration among the participating companies; who had all, because of the project, implemented several WHP initiatives. The companies in the established network jointly developed 56 different WHP initiatives. However, cross-company implementation of WHP activities were deemed to be too time consuming, which implies that the network was most fruitful in terms of generating ideas and for keeping up motivation within the individual companies. Furthermore, the contacts made through the network were sustained – although informally – after the completion of the formal project period.

2. Organisations involved

- The Municipality of Esbjerg
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- The Danish National Heart Association
- The Danish Work Environment Council



- 11 public and private companies situated in the Municipality of Esbjerg

3. Description of the case

3.1. Introduction

Many companies work on their own workplace health promotion (WHP) projects without discussing their approach with other companies. One Danish project attempted to establish a network among a group of companies. The objective of establishing this network of companies was to create synergies between the individual companies; and, in turn, enhance their potential to successfully implement activities in their workplace aimed at improving health, wellbeing and the work environment.

This case is based on the proposition that health promotion and improvements in the work environment go hand-in-hand. This is expressed both at the level of the programme-theory of the project, and, more importantly, in the concrete experiences at the specific companies.

The established network is underpinned by a partnership approach that aimed to provide a basis for knowledge sharing and enhance the capacity of the participating companies to implement WHP and work environment improvements. A network was created between 11 public and private companies situated in the Municipality of Esbjerg, the Danish municipality of Esbjerg, the Danish National Heart Association and the Danish Work Environment Council. During the course of the project, one company closed and another went through a major reorganisation; in total nine companies (five public and four private) participated in the full project period.

This case is particularly interesting as it attempts to establish a network *among* companies, in order to promote health and improve the work environment and work organisation. It is expected that the creation of such a network will create 'synergies' among the companies. These synergies are expected to be:

- mutual inspiration among the companies in terms of conceiving activities for promoting health and improving work environment; and



- enhanced opportunities for cross-company collaboration on concrete activities for health promotion and work environment improvement.

The project started on September 1st 2008 and ran until September 1st 2010.

3.2. Aims

The aims of this project were:

- to investigate whether a partnership/network among several companies in a local area enhances the capacity of the individual companies to implement WHP and work environment improvements;
- to investigate whether the partnership leads the participants to establish cross-company activities; and
- to enhance sustainability beyond the immediate project period by establishing long-term collaborations.

3.3. What was done, and how?

Building the network

The partnership project was jointly initiated by three organisations: the Danish National Heart Association, the Municipality of Esbjerg and the Danish Work Environment Council. It established a network of 11 public and private companies in the municipality of Esbjerg, with the aim to enhance the capacity of the individual companies to implement health promotion initiatives and make improvements to the work environment.

The three initiating organisations had different roles in the partnership. The municipality of Esbjerg recruited the participating companies. In addition, the municipality assisted the companies with providing knowledge on health promotion and preventive activities, and assistance on the development of the specific WHP activities. The National Heart Association contributed its knowledge on health promotion and with specific preventive activities. Finally, the Danish Work Environment Council financed the networking activities.

The project began with a kick-off meeting with all the organisations and companies participating in the network, attending (Fig. 1). At the kick-off meeting the aims of the project were introduced by the three organisations, and the participating companies introduced themselves and presented their motives for taking part in the network. Furthermore, two companies with experience in implementing health promotion initiatives and making work environment improvements, discussed their experiences, to inspire and motivate the companies participating in the network.

Figure 1: Kick Off Meeting

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After the kick-off meeting, a 'Future Workshop' was organised for the companies in the network. The aim of this follow-up workshop was to generate ideas for WHP initiatives in the participating companies. The motto of the 'Future Workshop' was: 'No one can do everything – Everybody can do something – Together we can do everything'. The follow up workshop began with a motivational speech on the potential of employees to have an impact on health promotion and work environment improvement in their own companies, and, in turn, in the partnership network (Fig. 2). The facilitator of the workshop delivered this speech. Subsequently, the participants formulated 77 specific ideas for activities aimed at enhancing WHP and work environment and organisation. The ideas were posted on a board so that the individual ideas could feed into the process for further inspiration.

When working as a group, the participants in the 'Future Workshop' developed the generated ideas and incorporated them into a common catalogue. The catalogue contained all the developed ideas for WHP and improvements in the physical, organisational, and psychosocial work environment.

Figure 2: Impressions of the Future Workshop



The members of the network participated in regular meetings to facilitate inspiration and cooperation between the participating companies.

Finally, in order to maintain inspiration and motivation among the participants in the project different lectures were given on the topic of health promotion and work environment improvement over the course of the project period.

The Idea-catalogue on WHP and work environment improvement

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The developed 'Idea-catalogue' provided inspiration to the companies participating in the project on how to cultivate WHP in the workplace, and make work environment improvements. In its final version the 'Idea-catalogue' contained about fifty concrete activities that were grouped in the four following themes:

- Wellbeing, collaboration in the workplace and physical and psychosocial work environment (22 activity proposals, e.g. social events, wellbeing surveys, wellbeing initiatives, physiotherapy at work);
- food, diet and health (5 activity proposals, e.g. healthy dietary initiatives, free fruits at work, network to promote healthy food in staff cafeterias);
- lifestyle and 'good habits' (6 activity proposals, e.g. talks on healthy lifestyles, smoking cessation courses, health checks); and
- physical exercise and health activities (14 activity proposals, e.g. participation in company sports, possibilities to work out during office hours, walk-and-talk meetings, joint memberships of fitness centres).

The 'Idea-catalogue' can be viewed at:

http://www.amr.dk/Files/Billeder/Nyhedsbrev/0309/Idekatalog_partnerskab_februar_2009.pdf

The Idea-catalogue and WHP and work environment improvement at the individual workplaces

In the next step of this project, the employees at the individual companies discussed the 'Idea-catalogue' and picked out the activities that were deemed most relevant for their specific workplace. The activities were then modified to suit the needs of the individual workplaces, and subsequently implemented. Altogether, 56 concrete initiatives for WHP and work environment improvement were implemented in the nine participating companies (that took part in the project from start to finish).

3.4. *What was achieved?*

- The results showed that the network was successful in terms of establishing a network between public and private companies, and that the companies through the network, largely, were able to share relevant ideas and inspire each other.
- A key lesson learned from the experience of the project is that health promotion activities must flow naturally from the daily business activities and must not cause too much 'hassle'. In the individual companies, the employees were more interested in participating in activities that contained a health-promoting element, but also gave opportunities for social interactions between the employees.
- The companies felt that the network enhanced their motivation and capacity for establishing health promotion activities and making work environment improvements. After the formal project activities terminated, the formal network was dissolved and has been substituted by more informal network activities between the nine companies.
- In most companies, activities started with a relatively narrow focus on health promotion. It was observed that as the project progressed that the activities assumed a wider focus on employee wellbeing; which also indicates that the employees - during the course of the project - increasingly adopted a more comprehensive view of workplace health that focussed on more social aspects of healthy work.
- The project period was extended after a request from the participating companies.
- After the project period expired, the formal network was substituted by more informal networking between the participants. As many of the participating companies felt that the inspiration they received as part of the network was beneficial with regard to their own health promotion and work environment improvement activities.

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- The project was officially closed with a conference where the partners presented and discussed their experiences from the partnership project (Fig. 3)

Figure 3: Final Conference



While the project was successful, it also faced some obstacles and problems:

- One initial ambition in creating the network was to establish cross-company collaboration on activities related to health promotion and work environment improvement did not materialise. One explanation on this issue was that the social element in WHP activities was a strong motivating factor for the individual employees to participate – and this social element that was lacking in cross company collaborative activities. Another explanation may be that the companies that participated in the project were very different. One way to overcome this problem may be to create cross-company initiatives in similar enterprises.
- A strong motivation for employees to participate in WHP activities was that many activities were based on interactions between colleagues. This element was lacking in cross-company collaborations on health promotion, which again can be considered a reason for the difficulties in establishing collaborations between the participating companies.

3.5. Success factors

- The support of the three initiating organisations – the Municipality of Esbjerg, the Danish National Heart Association and the Danish Work Environment Council – must be considered crucial for the success of the creation of the partnership project and the network.



- Interaction and support between the companies was enabled.
- Employees felt ownership of the concrete activities. As the employees had contributed to the development of the activities, they generally felt a strong sense of motivation to participate.

3.6. Further information

Further information can be obtained at the:

Danish Work Environment Council – <http://www.amr.dk>

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3.7. Transferability

This project was undertaken in a variety of companies – public and private, small and medium-sized, in manufacturers and service producers – and the experiences have generally been positive. As implementation occurred across sectors and size, this suggests that this type of WHP activity is transferable to most types of organisations.

The nine companies that completed the project were in the following lines of business:

- Maritime safety
- Energy
- Eldercare
- Iron industry
- Painting
- Education
- District psychiatry.

4. References, resources:

- A Danish description of the project can be found at the web-page of the Danish Work Environment council: <http://www.amr.dk/Default.aspx?ID=698>