

‘WIN–WIN’: A HEALTH IMPROVEMENT PROJECT AT A PAINTING COMPANY – THE NETHERLANDS

1. Organisations involved

- Van der Geest Schilderspecialisten (painting company)
- De Friesland (health insurance company)
- TNO (Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research)

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

The painting company Van der Geest Schilderspecialisten, which has provided services for construction, real estate, healthcare and education, has been based in the north of the Netherlands for 90 years. One of the largest of its kind, it employs about 125 people, the majority of whom are over 45 years old, with a history of long service with the company.

Companies in the Netherlands work under general health protection laws and are not required to implement programmes that specifically protect the health and wellbeing of older employees. The law on equal treatment of labour with respect to age forbids employers to limit working opportunities (hiring, working conditions and lay-offs) on the basis of age.

The ageing workforce, and the associated changes to their physical capacity, needs and abilities, led company management to pay particular attention to their health and safety issues. In 2010, the company began its ‘Win–Win’ project. This project targeted all employees (both painters and administrative staff) and focused on both physical and mental health. In general, problems related to physical health apply mainly to the painters, as they have to deal with physical strain such as a static load on the joints and the neck and shoulder muscles. Administrative staff complained more frequently about psychosocial problems, such as stress.

2.2. Aims

The ‘Win–Win’ project aimed to improve the physical and mental health of the employees of the painting company and to increase their employability. It worked to empower employees to inform management of health issues at an early stage. This early intervention prevented the situation from worsening by activating support mechanisms to address these issues quickly.

The questions raised at the beginning of the project included:

- How can employees remain healthy and employable? What are their needs and expectations?
- How can employees be encouraged to raise health-related problems at an early stage? How can employees be motivated to understand the importance of good health?
- How can older workers be kept in good health? How can an effective occupational safety and health (OSH) policy for older workers be implemented?
- What kind of interventions need to/can be implemented to address key risks in the workplace to ensure a focus on health as well as safety?

2.3. What was done, and how?

The ‘Win–Win’ project was implemented at Van der Geest Schilderspecialisten during a period of 6 months. It was based on, and made use of, various OSH tools developed by the Netherlands

Organisation for Applied Scientific Research (TNO). These tools provided both a framework for the project and the external support needed by the company to apply the project practically in the workplace.

The tools currently available on an online platform (<http://www.mkbfit.nl>) target small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and provide companies with practical tips and instruments that can be implemented in the workplace. All tools have been developed and tested by SMEs, in cooperation with TNO.

Types of tools include health surveys to map the situation at the workplace before and after the implementation of the initiative, checklists and information for employers on adapting workstations or tasks/jobs, and advice and tips on ergonomics, flexible working and the importance of promoting physical activity and healthy nutrition among employees.

2.3.1. Health survey to identify needs

At the start of the 'Win-Win' project, all employees received a health survey to assess their needs and expectations about their health, and to ensure that interventions were targeted appropriately. Of the 85 questionnaires distributed, 35 were completed and returned. Results included the following:

- A large number of employees were overweight (60%).
- There were more smokers than the national average (46% versus 28%).
- Seventy-seven per cent of the employees were willing to improve their health.
- People appreciated that the employer was giving attention to health and wellbeing in the workplace; however, people preferred to do health-promoting activities themselves and at home rather than, for example, having to do physical exercises with their colleagues.
- The top three health-promoting activities that employees would like to have implemented at the workplace were a fitness test, fitness classes and a course on how to quit smoking.
- Employees also expressed their dissatisfaction with the health insurance company in place.

2.3.2. Activities implemented

Based on the results from the survey, the company took action in four areas:

- collaboration with a new health insurance company to offer more tailored services to its employees;
 - cooperation with the TIGRA national network on employability to put in place a monitoring system for employee health complaints;
 - improving the return-to-work process for long-term sickness absence; and
 - exchanging information and practices with other SMEs on the same issues.
- **Support from health insurance company**

As mentioned, employees used the survey to express their dissatisfaction with the health insurance company in place. They reported the company's approach as rather formal and cold, with little real interest in their welfare. A new Dutch health insurance company (De Friesland) was identified, with which more targeted collective health insurance for staff was negotiated, as well as better support and guidance during sick leave. These new agreements took the needs analysis into account, focusing on health promotion activities (such as courses to quit smoking and healthy nutrition) as well as better support during sick leave (through the national network TIGRA – see 'Use health management/older worker employability network' below).

Employees were encouraged to report issues or problems related to their physical or mental wellbeing that were negatively affecting their work. They were also advised to report to managers any tasks or workplace exposures that they were concerned about. This systematic empowerment was designed to change the negative culture and attitude at the workplace towards people who are experiencing (age-related) health problems that affect their work performance. By openly talking about these issues and communicating the health benefits of work or task adaptations, the management hoped to change people's understanding and behaviour. The new health insurance company offered support throughout this process, providing advice to the company about possible adaptations of the working conditions to maintain and improve workers' health.

▪ Use health management/older worker employability network

The agreement with the new health insurance company sees workers' health complaints forwarded not only to the employer, but also to the Dutch national network TIGRA. This network specialises in health management at the workplace and focuses on increasing the vitality and employability of workers, in particular older workers. Where a worker brings up a problem related to his/her health, or an issue related to working conditions that affects his/her wellbeing, the management makes an initial evaluation of the situation itself. If the situation is more complicated, or they wish to have specialist advice, managers can consult the TIGRA network. Together, they discuss the complaint and the follow-up actions necessary. These might include adaptations of working conditions (for example workstations or working schedules) or provision of health services (such as physiotherapy). These actions depend on the scope and severity of the health complaint.

TIGRA uses a colour coding system to evaluate each complaint:

- Red signifies that the worker can no longer work, and there is an urgent need to intervene and to ensure that the person will return to work as soon as possible.
- Orange refers to the need to implement certain prevention measures (for example adaptation of working conditions) in order to ensure the problem does not worsen.
- Green means the person is considered healthy, leading TIGRA to advise the company in a general way on health promotion and healthy lifestyles.

▪ Improving return to work

During the project it became clear to management that the processes in place to monitor absenteeism were insufficient, with greater support needed for people returning to work after sick leave. Neither the communication to employees about aspects of return to work nor the guidance provided during long-term sick leave was adequate. Both needed to be better adapted to the culture and expectations of employees.

Through in-depth consultations with workers, the management gained a clearer understanding of their needs, which were then met by the provider De Friesland. Open communication between the health insurance provider and employees was crucial in gaining employee trust and maximising their motivation to contribute to return-to-work processes.

▪ Exchanging information with other companies

The online platform developed by TNO allowed Van der Geest Schilderspecialisten to make personal contact with a variety of companies facing similar situations and problems. This gave it an overview of the information and knowledge available on the topic of OSH within SMEs, and useful insights about the value and importance of implementing a health policy.

This direct knowledge exchange with other companies provided significant cross-learning for the management of Van der Geest Schilderspecialisten. The practical insights and confidence allowed more effective implementation of the company's own policies, as well as a deeper understanding of the benefits of such an initiative for the company and employees.

2.4. What was achieved?

The 'Win-Win' project was a success. Its activities were well received and there was a general raising of health awareness among employees. Additional efforts were made to implement more concrete OSH measures, as well as better monitoring of employee health.

Management also recognised that an occupational health policy is not simply a tool to reduce absenteeism and prevent disease, but a cultural approach driven by a commitment to sustainable working.

Despite the relatively short timeframe for the project (6 months), it has had a considerable impact on the perception of OSH in relation to ageing, on the part of both management and employees. Now, 5

years after the project was implemented, the resulting behaviour changes have been sustained, with greater awareness of the importance of promoting health, particularly in relation to age-related changes. Employees have accepted that certain tasks are carried out by younger workers, or that younger colleagues take over where older workers indicate that they can no longer carry out a certain task. Prior to the 'win-win' project, this understanding and cooperation did not exist, with older workers experiencing teasing or workplace bullying if they requested such help. Tasks such as working at heights, painting large surfaces and carrying heavy objects such as full paint buckets are now performed by younger workers. The company reports a positive workplace change towards focusing on people's abilities rather than their limitations.

Finally, as a result of this change in workplace mentality and behaviour, the company has registered a significant decrease in the absenteeism rate among older workers. Before the 'Win-Win' project, as many as 4 out of 10 older workers were frequently absent because of long-term illnesses or injuries (mainly musculoskeletal). Since the project, this rate has halved.

2.5. Success factors

The following success factors have been identified:

- *Information and knowledge exchange:* The online platform developed by TNO has provided access to practical advice and the experiences of other companies.
- *Involvement of workers:* Staff in all areas of the company have been consulted to determine needs.
- *External support:* The right health insurance company has been involved and has given support, and the project has had access to the health promotion/age management network, TIGRA.
- *Diversity of measures:* A number of measures have already been implemented, including early detection of health problems. Further actions are also planned, featuring both short-term measures, such as offering a smoking cessation course, and longer-term measures, such as improving the return-to-work policy in the company.

2.6. Transferability

The approach taken here is transferable to companies from all sectors which feature a combination of physical and mental stressors.

The tools provided by TNO are intended to be applicable to a wide range of companies from different sectors and geographical areas, and can thus be easily replicated.

2.7. Further information

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3. References and resources

- Interview with Peter van der Geest, director of Van der Geest Schilderspecialisten, painting company
- Website of Van der Geest Schilderspecialisten: <http://www.vandergeestschilderspecialisten.nl/>
- MKB-fit (n.d.), Van der Geest; win-win. Retrieved 07/11/2015, from: <http://www.mkbfit.nl/voorbeelden/voorbeelden-friesland/van-der-geest-schildersbedrijven-bv/van-der-geest-schildersbedrijven>
- TNO, website of MKB-fit: <http://www.mkbfit.nl/>
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