

FØRE VAR! (BE PREPARED!) —NORWEGIAN LABOUR INSPECTION AUTHORITY PROJECT TO PREVENT WORK-RELATED MUSCULOSKELETAL DISORDERS

Type of initiative: Labour inspections

Timeframe: 2010-2012

1 Description of the initiative

1.1 Introduction

The *Føre var!* (Be prepared!) project, run by the Labour Inspection Authority (*Arbeidstilsynet*), involved comprehensive inspections of businesses, covering almost 100,000 workers. These inspections assessed various factors relating to the prevention of MSDs.

1.2 Aim of the initiative

The aim was to help businesses to systematically prevent musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) in the work environment. It consisted of targeted inspections to assess the measures taken by employers to prevent MSDs and raising awareness of the need for risk assessment and the implementation of appropriate preventive measures.

1.3 Organisations involved

The Labour Inspection Authority is a government agency under the authority of the Ministry of Labour and is responsible for ensuring that enterprises meet the requirements of the Working Environment Act. Its overriding goal is to ensure an adequate working environment, safe employment conditions and meaningful work for all workers.

1.4 What was done and how

The project ran from 2010 to 2012. It was managed by the Labour Inspection Authority, which carried out inspections, gathered feedback from the businesses involved and made final recommendations. Inspection activities focused on aspects of prevention including:

- mapping the work tasks and assessing the risk factors that can lead to work-related MSDs;
- the action plan with measures to prevent MSDs (based on the completed risk assessment);
- worker participation — the platforms and procedures that exist for workers to influence the work environment;
- training in safety and health at work for employers, workers' representatives and work environment committees;
- workers' training on the specific risk factors identified in the mapping and risk assessment exercises;
- affiliation and cooperation with occupational health services.

The sectors and branches to be inspected were selected based on a risk assessment informed by research and Labour Inspection Authority expertise. Information was also gathered from meetings with workers' and employers' organisations in the relevant sectors.

A total of 4,194 inspections were carried out between 2010 and 2012. The inspections focused on those sectors in which workers have a relatively high risk of developing MSDs:

- pre-school establishments such as nursery schools (1,184 inspections, which focused on known risk factors such as lifting children);
- the construction sector (937 inspections, which focused on working in cold temperatures, time pressure and awkward postures);
- industry (617 inspections, which focused on workstation quality and mechanical vibrations);
- accommodation and restaurants (457 inspections, which focused on known risk factors such as heavy lifting, awkward postures, difficult customers and time pressure);
- ambulance services (72 inspections, which focused on awkward postures, health and infection hazards and time pressure);
- businesses with office work (466 inspections, which focused on sedentary work, time pressure and awkward postures).

The issues under scrutiny included psychosocial as well as physical factors.

The inspections revealed that only 40 % of the companies were able to document having carried out a risk assessment with an emphasis on preventing MSDs. The Labour Inspection Authority considered this result worrying, given that the establishments selected belonged to industries with a known high risk of MSDs. While most of the businesses had taken measures to prevent MSDs, these were seldom based on systematic mapping and risk assessment. Similarly, only 40 % of the businesses had implemented statutory training on the prevention of MSDs. Although it is the employer's duty to ensure that risks and preventive measures are covered in training, the Labour Inspection Authority found that training was insufficient to address the factors that can cause work-related MSDs.

In addition, 27 % of the companies inspected had failed to meet their obligation to affiliate with approved occupational health services, with the results showing that this requirement was, in fact, largely unknown. The inspections further showed that many businesses had not completed the required occupational safety and health (OSH) training for supervisors and workers' representatives. Following the inspections, many warnings were issued: the Labour Inspection Authority sent administrative orders to 325 companies on the training of supervisors, 349 companies on the election of workers' representatives and 523 companies on the training of workers' representatives.

The Labour Inspection Authority concluded that systematic OSH management was required. Businesses therefore needed to increase their expertise in carrying out mapping and risk assessments of the factors in their work environment that could lead to MSDs. Physical, organisational and psychosocial factors should be assessed individually and in combination. The measures taken must be based on the risk assessment, with occupational health services assisting in implementing work environment measures that require professional competence. The involvement of workers' representatives and employees is a necessary part of OSH management. Workers also have a degree of responsibility in ensuring that the measures identified are implemented effectively (and presumably also in drawing attention to the issues when there are difficulties in doing so). The role of the workers' representative was highlighted, and in particular the need for workers to be more aware of the representative's role in protecting workers' interests in respect of the working environment. Employers must comply more closely with legal provisions relating to information and training, ensuring that workers are aware of the risk factors associated with the development of work-related MSDs.

Following the initial inspections, companies were supported in their efforts to step up systematic OSH management and the prevention of MSDs. Follow-up inspections were carried out in 211 establishments in 2012. The inspections thus raised awareness about these issues and promoted the wider use of risk assessments. The project was innovative in that the inspections were targeted and comprehensive, covering safety and health, and the psychosocial and physical well-being of workers. The findings illustrate a problem that appears to be common to many MSDs, namely that messages regarding the need for action and the underlying legal duties do not seem to be getting through to employers.

1.5 What was achieved

During the follow-up period, the Labour Inspection Authority received documentation from the companies that showed positive developments. The follow-up suggested that after the inspections work had been done to identify safety and health issues and to develop preventive measures. Managers, employees and occupational health services worked together to implement these measures, many of which resulted in improvements in the work environment and work organisation, removing or reducing the risk of MSDs.

Of the establishments where follow-up inspections were carried out, 96 % confirmed that their knowledge about MSDs and how to prevent them had improved since the initial inspection.

1.6 Success factors and challenges

The inspections targeted the sectors with the highest risk of MSDs. They were very comprehensive, covering a broad range of issues, from risk assessment to worker participation and training. The inspections were complemented by awareness-raising activities, training and follow-up inspections.

1.7 Transferability

Thorough inspection of high-risk businesses is a broadly transferable activity. There are some important lessons to be learned about the quality of risk assessments carried out by employers and the risk prevention measures adopted as a result. The initiative found that more than half of the businesses surveyed had not carried out any form of risk assessment and that risk reduction measures were often ad hoc rather than systematic. Experiences in other countries suggest that Norway is not unique in this respect and that, rather than focusing on whether or not risk assessments have been carried out, attention should be paid to the quality of those assessments and any subsequent risk reduction measures.

2 Background

MSDs account for a significant proportion of sickness absence in Norway, with around 40 % of the country's reported sickness absence relating to MSDs. About one-third of those receiving disability pension are affected by an MSD. In the past, MSDs were typically associated with heavy physical/mechanical work, but the contributing factors are now recognised as being more complex and wide-ranging, including psychosocial and organisational factors.

Data from the Eurostat Labour Force Survey ad hoc module show that in the 5 years from 2007 to 2013 the percentage of workers in Norway reporting some form of MSD increased from 67.5 % to 71.5 %, compared with an overall EU increase from 54.2 % to 60.1 % in the same period.

OSH in Norway falls under the Norwegian Working Environment Act (of 17 June 2005, with subsequent minor changes). This includes provisions relating to MSDs (e.g. workplaces must be designed to avoid excessive physical loads, heavy lifting, monotonous repetitive work and awkward working positions). Other provisions cover the psychosocial working environment.

References and resources

- (1) Eurostat, 2018, 'European Union Labour Force Survey':
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey>
- (2) Arbeidstilsynet, 2013, 'Føre var!', Forebygging av arbeidsrelaterede muskel- og skjelettplager, Hovedfunn 2010-2012', summary of the project available in Norwegian at:
<http://docplayer.me/389709-Arbeidstilsynet-fore-var-forebygging-av-arbeidsrelaterede-muskel-og-skjelettplager-hovedfunn-2010-2012.html>

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