

NORWEGIAN LABOUR INSPECTORATE'S CALL SERVICE: SUPPORTING OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE (CASE NO4)

Introduction

Promotion of effective occupational safety and health (OSH) practices is a key element of safer and healthier workplaces. Improving arrangements and practices for managing OSH across a whole range of industry sectors and firm sizes — large, medium and small — is stimulated, supported and sustained by a range of institutional actors and processes both internal and external to firms. Scientific research highlights, among other things, the critical role that state regulators, such as labour inspectorates but also prevention services, can play in OSH (EU-OSHA, 2021). This case study is part of a research project¹ conducted in Norway to provide further insight into this topic.

The call service is the Labour Inspection Authority's guide and counselling service. The call service operates at the national level and provides information and guidance on OSH-related matters in accordance with the Working Environment Act (WEA), the General Application Act and additional regulations within the scope of the Labour Inspector Authority. Informant who works in the call service described it as the Labour Inspection Authority's way of responding as a reactive guide.

Description of the case

Aims

The call service aims to provide guidance on all regulations within the scope of the Labour Inspection Authority and answers questions related to rights and duties in working life (Call Service, n.d.). While the call service cannot provide guidance on specific cases, it assists those who send their enquiries in solving their specific issues by helping them understand and use the regulations in the right way. Further, the call service can provide information on where else to seek help for specific cases.

By providing employers, employees, safety representatives and others with advice and guidance on working environment issues within the scope of the aforementioned legislation, the call service aims to equip relevant actors with the right knowledge and tools to comply with these regulations.

Organisations involved

As described by way of introduction, this case involves the Labour Inspection Authority's nationwide guidance and counselling service. Several actors relate to the call service by seeking advice or consultation on matters related to compliance with OSH legislations. The call service is available to employers, employees, inspectors, safety representatives and others who may have questions related to these matters. For this reason, the call service has been a central part of our interviews with numerous actors. The call service was discussed during the interviews with a representative from the Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, inspectors from the Labour Inspection Authority, a representative from a private enterprise obligated to have an occupational health service, regional safety representatives and, finally, a leader from the call service.

¹ The full report is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/norways-approach-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-role-labour-inspectorate-and-prevention-services>. Other case studies can be found in the report.

What was done, and how?

Basic structure

The call service was initiated at the local level by what used to be the Authority's department in the northern region of the country² around the turn of the millennium. It was decided that the call service would become a national arrangement as it proved to be effective at the local level. Because of this, the unit is located in Bodø. Today, the unit is part of the Authority's department on communication and user dialogue. A key informant who works in the unit reported that the team worked fully digitally during the COVID-19 pandemic and learned that this is possible. Nonetheless, our informant added that the benefit of being co-located is the competence building that takes place at the office.

The set of rules and legislation the team must respond to is very broad, and the call service receives questions related to everything from psychosocial to musculoskeletal working environment issues. Therefore, the unit's employees come from a number of different occupational backgrounds. The unit is highly interdisciplinary and consists of approximately 21 full-time employees. The service is open on weekdays, from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. and from 12 p.m. to 2 p.m. The call service provides advice and guidance for employers, employees and others on working environment issues within the scope of the WEA, the General Application Act and additional regulations under the authority of the Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority. Questions can be sent in Norwegian, English, Romanian, Lithuanian, Russian and Polish and answers are provided in those languages. The service contributes to the development of content on the Authority's webpage, and a large part of its work is also connected to administrating the access to information in line with the Public Administration Act. The team also needs knowledge about 'neighbouring sets of rules' to guide people in the right direction or to steer them towards other relevant agencies when the questions they receive are not related to the regulations within the scope of the Labour Inspection Authority. For instance, some of the questions they receive relate to the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV).

The employees in the call service alternate between answering enquiries by phone and by email and chat. The number of employees assigned to each of these tasks varies depending on the volume of phone calls. For instance, if six workers initially were set to answer the phone at the start of the shift, and there is a growing queue of calls, a larger number of employees are assigned to answer enquiries by phone. New employees are provided with basic training that lasts six weeks. After this, they start answering enquiries by chat independently and then by phone when considered ready to do so. An employee is considered 'new' during the first year of service.

Enquiries for the call service are submitted through one of the Authority's websites.³ Through its website, the Authority also receives a large number of tip-offs regarding questionable working conditions from safety representatives, union representatives, workers and others. These tip-offs are not the responsibility of the call service and are sent to another unit. Sometimes, the other unit concludes that the tip-offs do not regard anything the Authority can solve or wants to prioritise, or maybe the legislation has been misinterpreted. In these cases, some of the tip-offs are forwarded back to the call service for help and guidance with the rules. Some people also try calling the call service directly with such tip-offs. In these instances, the call service guides the caller to report the tip-offs to the right place as a common register of all tip-offs is of great help to the Authority's risk-based strategy (see [case NO1](#)⁴ for more detailed information).

Part of the call service's work is also concerned with answering questions related to working environment issues at the webpage 'ung.no' ('young.no'). Ung.no is a platform providing quality-assured information to young people (ung.no, n.d.). The platform is managed by the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs. A small panel in the call service works with answering questions that ung.no receives; some of the responses go directly to the person who asked the question and some are published on the website if the management considers they could be useful to other readers.

² In 2020, the Labour Inspection Authority was reorganised from a geographically based organisation model to a function-based organisation model.

³ See: <https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/kontakt-oss/telefon-chat/>

⁴ Case NO1 is available at: <https://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/norwegian-labour-inspectorates-risk-based-strategy-supporting-occupational-safety-and-health-compliance-case-no1>

Improvements

The call service emphasised that a higher degree of analysis of the enquiries they receive could be useful, for instance, gathering data on what industries recur most often in these enquiries. Gaining an overview of the questions that are asked and of recurring topics can be helpful for recognising which issues characterise the labour market and what OSH topics are especially difficult for employers and safety representatives to understand.

It was also noted by one of the inspectors interviewed that some employers have very specific questions related to their own situation and emphasised that the call service is more suited to providing general feedback, as they cannot provide guidance on a specific case without knowing all the facts and details. Our informant underlined that this is natural as the call service must be careful how it represents itself.

Target groups

The call service's target groups are employers, employees, safety representatives and others who have questions related to OSH matters within the scope of the WEA, General Application Act and additional regulations within the scope of the Labour Inspection Authority.

Some inspectors also reported that they contact the call service when they are uncertain about something and that they inform workers and employers during inspections that they can contact the call service if they have questions about OSH legislation. Informants mentioned that several employers reported having used the call service along with the Authority's website in situations where they were uncertain about OSH matters.

The call service offers written guidance in English, Romanian, Lithuanian, Russian and Polish, and therefore aims to reach foreign employers and workers. The call service's guidance in different languages is developed in close cooperation with SUA (SUA, n.d.). SUA is the Service Centre for Foreign Workers, and a cooperation between the Labour Inspection Authority, the police, the Norwegian Tax Administration and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration. The call service informed us that SUA and the call service complement one another as SUA provides the language skills and the call service has a lot of competence related to OSH regulations. The call service is also available through the Authority's webpage 'Know your rights',⁵ which provides information on rights and obligations for all employees in the Norwegian labour market in several different languages.

While the call service does not have comprehensive statistics on what industries make the most enquiries, it was reported that the unit receives somewhat fewer enquiries regarding the public sector taking into consideration the number of people who work there. The informant also noted that there are some differences between smaller and larger enterprises. A reason for this is that larger enterprises are more often covered by collective agreements and have union representatives and safety representatives in order. Therefore, enquiries more often regard smaller enterprises.

Degree of effectiveness / success factors

The Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority considers the call service's degree of effectiveness to be high, as the unit consists of a team with several different occupational backgrounds, providing specialised guidance in several different languages via phone, chat and email. The introduction of the call service's chatbot has further improved its effectiveness. . The chatbot is algorithm-based, recognising words from the questions it receives and then selecting the correct answer from a database of prewritten answers. Table 1 shows the number of answers provided by the call service via phone, chat and email over the past several years.

⁵ See: <https://www.arbeidstilsynet.no/en/working-conditions/knowyourrights/>

Table 1: Number of answers provided by the call service via phone, chat and email, 2017 to 2021 (Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, 2022)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Telephone guidance	54,708	48,398	42,539	38,806	38,794	33,433
Guidance through chat and email	13,162	14,139	22,080	23,220	23,806	24,106

As Table 1 shows, the number of answers provided via phone in recent years has declined while the number of answers provided via chat and email has increased substantially.

Supervision/sanctions or prevention?

The mission of the call service is to provide employers and safety representatives with the right knowledge and tools to comply with relevant OSH regulations, to suit a preventive approach rather than a supervisory approach. The call service does not have a supervisory role other than forwarding information to the Authority in cases of serious breaches.

Influencing factors considered in the supervisory institutions and prevention services

Twenty-one people are employed in the call service, in addition to a few temporary employees who contribute during busier periods. The staff represent a number of different professions, including lawyers, educators, police, nurses, engineers and social scientists. The reason for this broad range of competencies is the variety of enquiries the call service receives. Our informant from the call service emphasised that a team with a large range of experience from different industries and occupations is an asset for understanding those who call or send their enquiries to the unit. The informant added that the unit has become very good at finding the right employees, as well as at the onboarding process.

Degree of innovation

The call service collects data on all the enquiries the unit receives and aims to group them all by categories based on different topics. Altogether, there are 80 different categories, portraying the broad range of enquiries the unit receives. Working hours is the most frequently recurring category. However, it only amounts for about 10% of all enquiries.

Since 2015, there has been a real emphasis on developing the Labour Inspection Authority's webpage, which consequently receives a lot of visitors. This has resulted in a decrease in the number of enquiries the unit receives through phone calls over the past decade. Part of the call service's work is to continuously update the Authority's webpages to be more precise and accessible to the public.

In January 2023, the call service introduced a chatbot. An informant who works in the unit reported that the chatbot has become better than first expected and is expected to answer more than 60,000 enquiries in 2024. The chatbot is algorithm-based. It uses a database, recognising words in the question and finding the correct answer in a database of prewritten answers based on this. It cannot formulate answers on its own. The call service is still working on how to collect and systemise the data from the questions the chatbot receives. If the chatbot does not have an answer available to the question that is asked, the person who asks the question is forwarded to a chat with a worker in the call service.

Results / What was achieved?

The call service provides answers to a large number of enquiries every year through phone, email and chat. The call service provides answers related to 80 different categories of OSH-related matters in accordance with the WEA, the General Application Act and additional regulations within the scope of the Labour Inspector Authority. In addition, the call service provides answers to Norwegian youths' enquiries about working life submitted through the website ung.no and provides information in several languages through its cooperation with SUA. The chatbot that was introduced in 2023 is expected to further improve the call service's effectiveness.

The call service's role became particularly clear during the COVID-19 pandemic when it played a national role in answering enquiries concerning the new COVID-19 regulations pertaining to working conditions (Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, 2020). To fulfil this role, the call service received guidance on these regulations from the Norwegian Directorate of Health. Through the combination of these means, the call service plays a central role in spreading awareness and providing knowledge on OSH legislation among and to employers, workers, safety representatives and others. In reference to the number of enquiries the call service provides answers to, as presented in Table 1 (33,433 by phone and 24,106 by chat and email in 2022), the call service is considered by the Authority as an effective means to ensure compliance with OSH legislation in Norwegian working life.

Transferability to EU Member States

An informant who works in the call service emphasised that it should be possible to transfer the work of the call service to EU Member States. However, it was stated that the transferability would depend on the arrangements other Member States have, with the assumption being that they would have some sort of arrangement for guidance within their existing legal framework.

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