NETWORK OF HEALTHY SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES (SMES)

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- **Abstract**

**Issue**
Where larger organisations are increasingly investing in the health of their employees by systematically implementing a health policy, this appears to be lacking in many small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). One possible reason for this is that SMEs often have limited opportunities to develop and implement an integrated health management policy. Also, there is often a poor exchange of information among SMEs about effective health management policies.
Action

This case study aims to describe how network meetings were used to develop and implement health management and workplace health promotion (WHP) programmes in SMEs. TNO and Gepoma (both companies offer consultancy for organisations in the field of health at work) supported the participating companies in the process of preparing a plan of action and, in turn, implementing solutions. Network meetings were used to share information and knowledge about health management and WHP. The practical difficulties of implementing a health management policy and work health programmes were also discussed during the network meetings. To further disseminate knowledge among other SMEs, a website was developed with useful information on: how to set up a health policy, the tools and instruments that can be used when setting up a health policy, and good practice examples of other companies that have implemented health policies.

Results

The companies participating in the project were considered to benefit greatly from the networking events. During these events, SMEs learned about the benefits of a health policy and how this can contribute to employee wellbeing and company productivity. SMEs gained practical information on how to set up a health policy, and how, in turn, to align this with the goals and strategy of the organisation. In addition, SMEs learned how to implement a health programme, and how to motivate employees to participate in the programme. The network meetings were not only helpful in providing shared experiences and good practices, but also functioned as a means to motivate and remind companies to take actions. Presenting information at the meetings encouraged companies to keep health high on their agenda, and not to lose focus within the daily business of the company.

2. Organisations involved

The small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) involved were:

- Lifestyle, sports centre (Fig. 1)
- Offermans, construction company
- WellColl, automotive (Fig. 2)
- Division of Arcelor Mittal, steel producer (Fig. 3)
- ZNKC, gas company

These SMEs were supported by TNO and Gepoma.

TNO is a knowledge-based organisation in the Netherlands working for companies, government bodies and public organisations. It develops and applies knowledge in different core areas of occupational health and safety. One of these areas is ‘Quality of Life’, with topics related to ‘Health at Work’.

Gepoma is a company in the South of the Netherlands consulting SMEs on occupational health and safety (OSH) matters (Fig. 4).
3. Description of the case

3.1. Introduction

More and more SMEs in the Netherlands are seeking information about how they can implement health programmes within their own organisations. For example in Limburg (a region in the South of the Netherlands where the population has a higher average age than in the rest of the Netherlands), SMEs have to deal with the issue of an ageing workforce. Factors such as lifestyle, job duration, and physical exertion become increasingly important as an employee ages. This brings with it concerns about productivity, which in relation to health and vitality of both the employee and employer, is an important issue to address.

It is important to have a health policy in place that deals with the issue of age-related changes and worker capabilities. Companies should take measures to avoid the risk of physical harm, or a decrease in concentration levels that can lead to sickness absence.

Where larger organisations increasingly invest in the health of their employees by systematically implementing a health policy, this appears to be lacking in many SMEs. One possible reason for this is that SMEs often have limited opportunities to develop and implement an integrated health management policy. Also, there is often a poor exchange of information between SMEs about effective health management policies.

In 2009, TNO and Gepoma (both companies offer consultancy for organisations in the field of health at work) supported the setting up of a health management policy within SMEs in two regions of the Netherlands. This was achieved by organising network meetings; and making existing knowledge and information available to SMEs, rather than developing new approaches.

3.2. Aims

The aims of the project were to:

- provide SMEs with an insight into the added value of health management programmes;
share information and practical solutions for implementing workplace health promotion (WHP) initiatives; and

disseminate information and good practice about health management programmes to other SMEs throughout the Netherlands.

3.3. What was done, and how?

Creation of a network

In this project a network was created with five SMEs in the South of the Netherlands. The initiative to start this network came from TNO, as a partner of Syntens (for more information please see the section on 'Financial support'). TNO worked with Gepoma. Gepoma recruited the companies. As it consults with many SMEs in the South of the Netherlands, they knew which companies should participate in a health management programme.

Financial support

The project described in this case study was financially supported by an innovation programme of Syntens. Syntens is an innovation network for SMEs, which was founded in 1998 as an initiative of the Netherlands Ministry of Economic Affairs. Syntens’ mission is to: strengthen the capacity to innovate of small and medium-sized companies, to stimulate successful innovation, and to make a visible contribution towards sustainable growth. They do this by providing information and advice aimed at innovation within SMEs. Syntens is a network organisation, which means that they use knowledge of different partners. TNO is one of its partners.

To be able to participate in the innovation programme described in this case study, companies had to meet a few criteria. Firstly, a minimum of five participating companies was required. Secondly, the companies had to contribute 10% of the total costs of the programme. Syntens contributed 50,000 euro (financed by the Dutch government). Therefore, the companies had to contribute 5000 euro (10%). This contribution was equally divided by the companies depending on the amount of employees working for the company.

Network meetings were used to develop and implement health management and WHP programmes. Each meeting took three hours. The meetings were organised in the companies itself. At each meeting a tour was given by the companies. This allowed the companies to get mutually acquainted.

Phases in the project

The project was divided into five phases:

1) Preliminary network meeting

During the first network meeting, companies presented themselves to each other. Each company gave a short presentation of their company business, how they were engaged with health management, what health-related problems they faced, and what goals they had. Their expectations of the programme were discussed (Fig. 5 and 6).
2) Company surveys

A company survey was carried out by an experienced health management consultant from TNO and Gepoma at each company. During this interview, discussions took place about the expectations of the company, the makeup of the employees, the requirements imposed by the environment, and how these may impact on the health and wellbeing of the employees. Finally, individual goals were set with each company about what they wanted to achieve; and, in turn, a plan of action was formulated that would aim to achieve these goals.

3) Goal setting and planning

At the second network meeting, the individual goals of each of the companies were discussed. Following this meeting companies modified their plan of action, if necessary. Practical solutions and ideas about what actions could be taken were also discussed. Questions that were raised included:

- How to set up a health programme?
- Which health activities fit best with organisations? (Fig. 7)
- How can an organisation encourage employees to care for their own health and use the resources available?

Each company had worthwhile ideas that could be used by the other companies.
4) Implementation

Phase four of the project involved companies implementing their proposed solutions. During the networking meetings companies exchanged their experiences about the problems and difficulties they faced when trying to implement solutions. For example, there was a company that wanted to offer smoking cessation training to its staff, which was offered by an external consultant. As they were a small company, they had an insufficient number of employees to make the training viable. Therefore, cooperation was sought with other companies that had similar needs for this type of training.

Another company had to deal with a number of financial cut backs due to the economic recession. Consequently, their health policy came under pressure. They solved this problem by examining how health benefits could be achieved with limited financial cost. This was achieved by paying particular attention to activities already undertaken regardless of the health strategy, and adapting them to achieve health benefits for the employees. For example, the company’s annual festive Christmas celebration was organised in a way that was considered healthier, and became an event in which employees’ families participated. This was done by organising a Christmas walking tour. Later in the year a marathon was organised for employees and family members. During this marathon there was a catering services for the visitors. The proceeds of these services where donated to charity.

Involving family members in activities is seen as an important means by which to promote healthy behaviour. For example, healthy eating was promoted while a lot of men in the company had their dinner cooked by their wives. For this reason they involved the wives as well in promoting healthy eating and gave them information on healthy cooking. The managers of the company gave a presentation to its staff in which the opportunities and threats to the business were jointly discussed. These discussions also involved a lot of employee participation; and included discussions on responsibilities of employees and the actions they could take to improve their own situation, and, how in turn, the company could support them.

5) Web portal for sharing information

Phase five of the project involved documenting the experiences of the companies. For each company, case studies were written up. The information was disseminated to other SMEs via a website. The website provided SMEs information on: how to setup a health policy, the tools and instruments needed to accomplish this, and provided some good practice examples.

The website has been tested by companies in terms of its practical usability. At a regional meeting of SMEs in the Southern region of the Netherlands the web portal was presented to other companies.

Experiences gained

For the successful implementation of a health management policy, it is important that managers are engaged in the topic and see the importance and benefits to their business. Furthermore, a person within the company should be given responsibility for implementing the policy.
It is difficult to give importance to health, when there is no direct trigger for it. For that reason it is important that managers within companies are aware of the benefits of a health policy and the benefits it can provide, besides the direct effects on sickness absence rates.

The network meetings in this project helped the participating companies to maintain the importance of health management within their organisations.

### 3.4. What was achieved?

Those companies participating in the project were considered to benefit greatly from the networking events. SMEs learned about the benefits of a health policy and how this can contribute to employee wellbeing and company productivity. SMEs gained practical information on how to set up a health policy, and how to align this with the goals and strategy of the organisation. They learned how to implement a health programme and how to involve employees to participate in the programme.

The network meetings were not only helpful in providing shared experiences and good practices, but also functioned as a means to motivate and remind companies to take actions. Presenting information at the meetings encouraged companies to keep health high on their agenda, and not to lose focus of it within the daily business of the company.

### 3.5. Success factors

- Low cost, simple solutions can contribute to the health and wellbeing of employees. Starting small and build gradually but consistently, to achieving your desired plan.
- Inform employees on health issues in already existing meetings in the organisation. This makes it easier than to organise special meetings focusing only on health.
- Networking is a means by which to stimulate and maintain health as a priority on a company’s policy agenda. This project was implemented during the economic recession that was experienced by a number of different businesses in the Netherlands. Health is a topic that can easily be moved to the background during such a time, this is why network meetings can serve as an important means to motivate and remind companies of the benefits of a health policy.

### 3.6. Further information

Further information can be found on the web portal that was developed for those SMEs:

[http://www.mkbfit.nl](http://www.mkbfit.nl) (Dutch language)

### 3.7 Transferability

In cooperation with those companies that participated, a website was developed that provided tools that enabled SMEs to implement a health management strategy. The tools have been tested and implemented. There are now a series of good practice examples and helpful tips that other SMEs can use.

### 4. References, resources:

- Webportal developed for SMEs in the Netherlands [http://www.mkbfit.nl](http://www.mkbfit.nl)