

TOGETHER FOR A GOOD WORKING ENVIRONMENT (NORWAY)

Type of initiative: Tripartite agreement and collaboration

Timeframe: 2007-2010

1 Description of the initiative

1.1 Introduction

In 2007, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs initiated the project '3-2-1 Together for a good working environment — 3 parties, 2 branches, 1 goal'. The project involved a collaboration between the Labour Inspection Authority (*Arbeidstilsynet*), the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV), employers' and workers' organisations, and industry. The project lasted 3 years and was managed by the Labour Inspection Authority. It focused on musculoskeletal disorder (MSD) prevention, among other areas.

The project built on the tripartite Agreement on a More Inclusive Working Life (the IA Agreement), which was first concluded by employers, workers and the government in 2001. After the two implementation periods, 2001-2005 and 2006-2010, it was renegotiated in 2010 for the period 2010-2013, and a revised agreement was signed in March 2014, valid for the period 2014-2018. After 17 years, the IA Agreement was renegotiated and amended in 2018. The new agreement was signed by four trade union confederations in December 2018 and will remain in place until 2022. The main goals of the IA Agreement are to improve the working environment, prevent and reduce absenteeism, and prevent exclusion and withdrawal from working life.

The three measurable objectives of the current IA Agreement are to:

- achieve a 20 % reduction in sick leave compared with the second quarter of 2001 (i.e. on a national level sick leave must not exceed 5.6 %);
- prevent withdrawal and increase employment of people with impaired functional ability;
- extend active employment after the age of 50 by 12 months (i.e. the agreement targets an increase in the average labour force participation rate for people over the age of 50 compared with 2009).

As the last two targets have been perceived as conflicting with reducing sickness absence, no new targets were set in those areas in the new agreement.

By entering into the cooperation agreement and becoming an 'IA enterprise', an enterprise declares that it supports the goals of the IA Agreement. Entry into this cooperation agreement means that employers, trade union representatives, safety delegates and other employees in the enterprise commit to purposeful collaboration to achieve a more inclusive workplace. An important condition for achieving the goals of the IA Agreement is that IA enterprises carry out systematic preventive health, safety and environment (HSE) work and that their work under the IA Agreement is an integral part of this work.

In return, IA enterprises benefit from:

- their own contact person at the NAV Inclusive Workplace Support Centre;
- prevention and facilitation subsidies from the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service (part of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, NAV);

- extended use of self-certification.

Based on the three sub-goals in the IA Agreement, each enterprise must set its own goals for the IA work. Goals are drawn up jointly by the employer, employee representatives, safety delegates and other employees within 12 weeks of entering into the cooperation agreement. The national IA Agreement emphasises that the sub-goals must be considered as a whole to reach the goal of a more inclusive working life. Where possible, the enterprise must set goals for all three sub-goals.

Entry into the cooperation agreement commits the enterprise, its employees and the Labour and Welfare Service to IA work. The agreement sets out the obligations of all the stakeholders in the contract: the NAV, the employer, employees and employee representatives.

1.2 Aim of the initiative

The objective of this project was to trial and evaluate tripartite cooperation between the government and the social partners, represented by trade unions and employers' organisations. It focused on improving the work environment, reducing sick leave and increasing the retirement age in two chosen sectors: the meat and poultry industry and nursing homes. In both sectors, MSDs account for the highest proportion of medical problems leading to early retirement and sick leave (with mental illnesses being the next largest category); therefore, these issues were a particular focus for the project. The nursing home sector was of particular concern; rates of MSDs are higher in women than in men, not only among older workers but also among relatively young workers; rates of MSDs are higher in women than in men, not only among older age groups but also among relatively young workers.

1.3 Organisations involved

The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) is a public welfare agency, consisting of the state Labour and Welfare Service as well as municipal welfare agencies. It is responsible for a third of the state budget of Norway, administering programs such as unemployment benefits, pensions, child benefits and more. One of its aims is to increase the number of people active and in the labour market, with fewer people claiming benefits. Addressing the main causes of both long- and short-term absence from work is clearly linked to that goal.

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

In total, 21 nursing homes (in both the private and the public sectors) and 10 meat companies were recruited to the project. The selection was made based on NAV statistics on sick leave and a report from the National Surveillance System for Work Environment and Occupational Health on new recipients of disability benefits.

First, the Labour Inspection Authority, the NAV and trade associations assessed the working environment in the two industries and agreed on challenges, common goals and measures. They then provided targeted advice and recommendations to the individual companies and nursing homes.

The participating organisations, with the exception of one meat company, were all IA enterprises that had signed the tripartite IA Agreement with the NAV. The IA Agreement bound the companies and their workers to work systematically, with a view to achieving the goal of a more inclusive workplace. The organisations participating in the project concluded a written agreement with the Labour Inspection Authority, as the overall project manager, agreeing to establish tripartite cooperation and to participate in the planned joint activities of the project (1).

At the beginning of the project, regional and sectoral meetings were held, to which the companies' managers, trade union representatives and safety representatives were invited. The meetings focused on establishing cooperation between the stakeholders and systems and procedures for IA work processes. All the participating organisations also agreed to participate in a work environment survey and complete the General Questionnaire for Psychological and Social Factors at Work (QPS Nordic), administered by the National Institute of Occupational Health (STAMI) at the beginning and end of the project. QPS Nordic measures a number of factors that affect health, well-being and motivation at work. In addition, companies answered specific questions related to mental health, MSDs and sickness absence. Musculoskeletal disorders were measured using the musculoskeletal pain scale from the Subjective Health Complaints Inventory. This scale measures the extent to which pain is experienced in different parts of the body: neck, upper back, lower back, arm and shoulder, and foot pain. The survey was conducted during a 3-week period in the autumn of 2008, with workers completing either an online or a paper questionnaire.

In total 1,138 people from 10 businesses in the meat and poultry industry were invited to participate in the survey, with 702 responding (a response rate of 61.7 %). A large proportion of participants reported having little control over the demands of their job (59.4 %), while 32.8 % stated that middle managers often did not show interest in addressing psychosocial issues in the workplace.

Of the workers in the nursing home sector, 38 % of respondents reported experiencing some neck pain in the previous 30 days, with figures of 28 %, 39 %, 30 %, 40 % and 28 % for the upper back, lower back, arms, shoulders and feet, respectively. The neck, shoulders and lower back were therefore the three body areas with the highest prevalence of problems.

Slightly higher figures were reported by workers in the meat industry, with 52 % reporting some neck pain, 43 % upper back pain, 54 % lower back pain, 54 % arm pain, 58 % shoulder pain and 33 % foot pain. Here, arm pain also emerged as a major factor, which is consistent with the high degree of repetitive hand and arm work in some jobs in this sector.

During the project, two working groups with a good knowledge of the working environment and challenges in the meat industry and nursing homes sector, respectively, were established. The relevant employers' and workers' organisations were represented in these groups, together with the NAV Labour and Welfare Service and the Labour Inspection Authority.

The nursing homes and meat companies that partnered on the project varied in size (number of employees) and structure and faced different occupational safety and health (OSH) challenges. Although workers' health and sickness absence provided a common focus for all participating companies, it was agreed that it was the company/organisation itself that was best placed to assess its challenges and determine the most effective strategies and measures. On this basis, systematic HSE work was selected as a priority area for meat companies, while nursing homes decided to focus on developing competences to address specific OSH challenges, including MSDs.

In order to address their sector-specific priority area of systematic HSE work, measures among the meat companies included updating their HSE systems, carrying out occupational environment mapping, providing Norwegian lessons for non-native speakers and trialling 6-hour working days. In the nursing sector, measures to address the sector-specific priority area of competence development included establishing reflection groups using a tool called 'Heart, head, hands', developed by the Norwegian Work Research Institute. The groups provided a forum in which members of staff could meet and develop their own as well as the team's ability to handle challenging situations. In addition, measures focused on aspects such as conflict management and bullying, since these had been identified as relevant problems. As a result, several nursing homes developed procedures to prevent bullying and conflicts in the workplace (3). During the project, supervisors from the NAV and the Labour Inspection Authority attended various project meetings and provided guidance to participants throughout the project activities to ensure that the objectives were achieved. They helped to drive the processes forward and provided training in areas such as HSE and IA work, conflict management, and laws and regulations.

The tripartite collaboration was innovative. The inclusion of the three parties (government — represented by the Labour Inspection Authority — workers' organisations and employers) provided a unique opportunity to work together on concrete tasks based on the tripartite IA Agreement. This is reflected in the project's name — 3-2-1 — which refers to three parties (employers' and workers' organisations and the authorities), two types of enterprise (meat companies and nursing homes) and one goal (together for a good working environment).

1.5 What was achieved

The 31 companies and organisations that participated in the project reported several positive results; some examples are provided below.

- Sick leave rates fell from 38.7 % to 32.1 % in the meat companies. In the nursing homes, however, it remained about the same (with a small increase from 57.8 % to 59.6 %).
- The proportion of workers who felt looked after by the management to a significant extent increased from 19.8 % to 32.9 % in the meat sector and from 40.2 % to 46.7 % in the nursing homes.
- The percentage of workers whose working conditions had been adapted to reduce the risk of being affected by a health problem again rose from 11.1 % to 19.8 % in the meat companies and from 25.4 % to 35.9 % in the nursing sector.
- Staff in the Lindeberg chain of nursing homes experienced a better work environment; employees were happier and more likely to praise each other.

Comparing changes in job demands between 2008 and 2010 in both participating sectors, there were small reductions in requirements such as uneven workload, overtime, fast work pace and having too much to do) and in decision-making requirements, e.g. having to make quick decisions, high levels of attention and making complicated decisions. However, neither of these reductions were statistically significant. Opportunities for learning and positive challenges at work showed small increases, which were not statistically significant either.

The survey results pointed to the importance of middle managers as key personnel in efforts to improve working environments and reduce sickness absence, which is in line with other studies on the same topic ⁽¹⁾. Companies should therefore focus on training and coaching middle managers to increase their confidence in the role. Senior leaders gained awareness from the final survey results of their own behaviour and decisions, became better at following up with their workers, and experienced better interaction and team spirit among themselves. The study also identified the benefits of collaboration among staff at all levels.

At the end of the project, in the meat sector, the new, systematic approach to HSE work was proved to work, in that work environment issues were taken more seriously, communication improved and there was more focus on preventive measures. In the nursing sector, managers also felt more comfortable in their roles and assigned more time for follow-up. Regarding competence development, managers reported that they had gained a better understanding of each other's challenges, that efforts to improve the working environment had become more systematic, and that managers and members of staff felt more confident about how to handle situations involving conflict or bullying. These changes were important, as the study found a significant correlation between psychosocial factors, such as lack of support from peers and superiors, and musculoskeletal problems, thus demonstrating the relationship between these issues.

The results highlighted that a well-designed HSE programme and IA work have the potential to enable managers to stay focused on the work environment and the well-being of workers. Systems for HSE and IA work should be adapted to the individual business, readily available to all and presented in a user-friendly manner.

A project evaluation found that all participating parties at all levels wished to take the experience of the 3-2-1 initiative further.

⁽¹⁾ For example, Aronson, G. and Lindh, T., 2004, 'Långtidsfriskas arbetsvillkor — En populationsstudie', *Arbeta och Hälsa*, 1-21, Stockholm, as referenced in (7).

1.6 Success factors and challenges

Tripartite cooperation between the authorities, employers and workers had not been tried before. Together with the methods and instruments developed, it represents an important success factor for the 3-2-1 project.

The project evaluation highlighted the importance of support provided by both authorities, the NAV and the Labour Inspection Authority. Participants stated that this had helped them gain a clearer, more holistic understanding of HSE and IA. The experience further developed the authorities' operational cooperation and, in particular, enhanced the information and guidance provided by the Labour Inspection Authority to stakeholders. After the project, representatives of both the employers and the workers who had participated stated that they felt open to reaching out to the Labour Inspection Authority if they needed to — something they had not previously considered as an option.

Other success factors included the mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities gained by middle managers, shop stewards and safety representatives through improved communication and collaboration. Although the participating companies operated under very different constraints and with widely differing organisational structures, this emerged as a common theme: communication and collaboration between all involved were perceived essential in both sectors to develop a safe and healthy working environment.

A common understanding of the objectives of the project and communication was crucial, with regular meetings put in place (adapted to daily operations) to facilitate interaction and practical action. Working group meetings between centralised and local levels of the project were also important, both for top-down and bottom-up communication and to ensure a good understanding of the shared goals.

1.7 Transferability

The concept of tripartite cooperation in addressing OSH issues is transferable to other countries and contexts. Involvement and guidance from the authorities constitute an essential element of that cooperation.

The participatory approach applied in the project in which workers at all levels agree priorities was a key feature of this initiative and easily transferable to similar projects.

Similar tripartite working arrangements exist in some Member States, and it seems likely that those with an established history of such cooperative working could easily implement this initiative.

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 disability pensions are due to MSDs. 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) Eurofound, 2012, 'Collaboration for a good working environment':
<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sr/publications/article/2012/collaboration-for-a-good-working-environment>
- (2) Eurostat, 2018, 'European Union Labour Force Survey':
<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-labour-force-survey>
- (3) Utaaker, E. and Hegdal, B., 2011, *Felles innsats — delt glede*, Norwegian Labour Inspection Authority, Trondheim. Available in Norwegian at:
https://www.nsf.no/Content/733418/cache=20112609101914/3-2-1_sluttrapport_web.pdf
- (4) Hauge, L. J., Skorstad, M. H. and Lau, B., *3-2-1 Sammen for et godt arbeidsmiljø: 3 parter — 2 bransjer — 1 mål: Oppfølgingsundersøkelse: Sykehjemssektoren*. Available in Norwegian at:
<https://stami.no/publikasjon/3-2-1-sammen-for-et-godt-arbeidsmiljo-3-parter-2-bransjer-1-mal-oppfolgingsundersokelse-sykehjemssektoren/>
- (5) Hauge, L. J., Lau, B. and Skorstad, M. H., *3-2-1 Sammen for et godt arbeidsmiljø: 3 parter - 2 bransjer - 1 mål: Oppfølgingsundersøkelse: Kjøttindustrien*. Available in Norwegian at:
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- (6) National Institute of Occupational Health (STAMI) website:
https://stami.no/publikasjon/?fwp_publication_search=sammen%20for%20et%20godt%20arbeidsmilj%C3%B8
- (7) Jacobsen, K., Moland, L. E. and Pettersen, T., 2010, *HMS og IA: To sider av samme sak?*, STAMI report No 7. Available in Norwegian at: <https://www.fao.no/index.php/zoo-publikasjoner/fafo-rapporter/item/hms-og-ia-to-sider-av-samme-sak>

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