

DIVERSITY PLAN: HOW TO BRING COMPREHENSIBLE INSTRUCTIONS TO THE WORK FLOOR?

1. Organisations involved

VANHOUT, Belgium

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

One of the ways in which the construction sector tries to compensate for the early retirement and difficulty in recruiting builders is to recruit people from various disadvantaged groups, i.e. the unemployed, underprivileged, immigrants and part time students.

This approach is creating growing diversity on construction sites, which gives rise to new health and safety risks. It is, for example, well known that accident rates are higher among young workers. Long-time unemployed workers have less work experience and knowledge of new technologies and the related risks. Immigrant workers often struggle with the language, which may hamper their understanding of safety instructions and create communication problems with their colleagues and bosses.

These problems can compromise safety at work. In addition, cultural background influences people's perception of, and behaviour regarding, health and safety risks. Information, instruction, training and supervision have to be provided for this specific group of workers to ensure their health and safety at work.

The VANHOUT group carries out a wide range of construction activities: office buildings, utility and residential projects, civil construction works, environmental technology and industrial production units. The group consists of VANHOUT, the contractor, as well as BOTECH, a research organisation, HBS, the company responsible for the finishing works, and BATECH Construct. Together they have a workforce of over 300 employees and a turnover of approximately EUR80 million. VANHOUT, which has been part of BESIX, an international group, since 1986, places a lot of emphasis on quality, environmental protection and safety. Thanks to these principles the company has been awarded ISO 9001 and VCA certification.¹

2.2. Aims

To tackle the issue of diversity in a well-structured way, VANHOUT developed a 'diversity plan' through a 2002 VESOC (Flemish Economic and Social Consultative Committee) action plan titled 'Equal participation and diversity in the labour market' VANHOUT's diversity plan aimed at updating and improving the company's existing policy on recruitment and selection, training, induction and promotion of underprivileged groups.

One of the latest points of action in VANHOUT's diversity and wellbeing policy is the development of a modular welcome brochure and a training programme for 'builders' godfathers'.

¹ The 'VCA system' ('VeiligheidsChecklist Aannemers' or 'Safety checklist for contractors') was originally a Dutch initiative. This system was developed to test and certify contractors objectively on the basis of their performance in terms of safety, health and environmental protection.



2.3. What was done, and how?

The legal motivation for this project lies in the Wellbeing Act, which stipulates that employers have to provide information, instruction, training and supervision to ensure the health and safety at work of (new) employees.

Development of a welcome brochure

This welcome brochure provides information and instructions on health and safety at work. It is tailor-made for disadvantaged groups of workers. It aims to increase awareness of health and safety risks in the workplace and demonstrate how to prevent them. A PAP commission (Positive Action Plan) was set up. This commission was assisted by STC Turnhout (which is now RESOC Kempen, i.e. the regional socio-economic consultative committee Kempen), Prevent (Institute for Occupational Safety and Health), Verbal Vision (a communication centre for non-profit and social actions within companies) and BIS (a graphic design agency). The development of the new welcome brochure lasted a year and on 24 January 2004 the brochure was presented to the entire VANHOUT staff.

The welcome brochure is written in simple Dutch and contains all the information newcomers need to familiarise themselves with the company so they quickly feel at home. The brochure is developed with the 'yellow pages' concept in mind: the various sections are easy to find and to consult. Every section tries to provide only information which is absolutely necessary. Where possible the text is illustrated to increase comprehension. Moreover, every section is preceded by a 'one-liner' to attract attention. The text was placed as much as possible in sections which stand out and words or paragraphs were highlighted to underline the essence of the message.

Moreover, the modular layout allows the company to introduce changes in a cheap way, i.e. by simply removing and replacing pages. The changes to the welcome brochure are distributed to the employees during the annual staff meeting. An important section in the welcome brochure covers occupational health and safety.

This section contains the following topics:

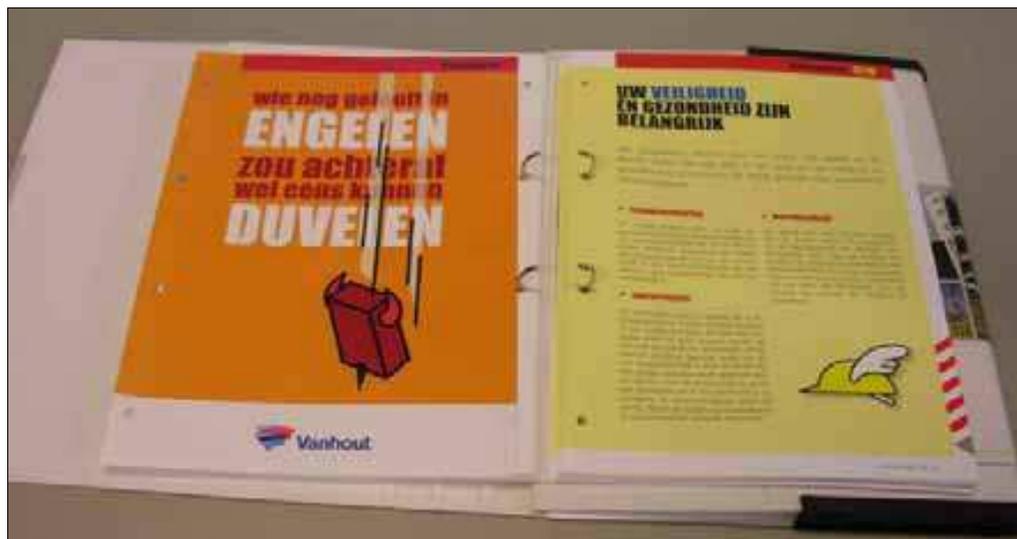
- OSH policy in the company
- How to prevent risks
- Working with new or temporary colleagues
- Manual handling
- Hand tools
- Commuter traffic
- Slips, trips and falls
- Fire safety
- Health-related risks
- Psychosocial risks
- Personal protective equipment
- Pictograms and signs
- Electrical safety
- Dangerous substances
- VDU work
- Working at heights
- First aid.

CASE STUDIES

Every newcomer receives a welcome brochure on arrival. The new workers can use this brochure during their further career as an instruction booklet for the completion of their tasks.

The welcome brochures raise employees' awareness of health and safety risks at the workplace and how to prevent them from the first day of their employment.

Figure 1. Welcome brochure



Training of 'builders' godfathers'

As part of the diversity plan, a number of 'builders' godfathers' were trained within the company. Eight employees completed a training programme for 'builders' godfathers'. They learned about communication, collaboration and motivation during this practical and interactive 3-day programme. They were taught – among other things – to deal with differences between people and opinions in a positive way (for example: cultural background influences people's perception and behaviour concerning health and safety risks). This programme included practical exercises during which the participants simulated situations on the construction site to promote safe and healthy work (for example: supervision on use of personal protective equipment, instructions on safe manual handling techniques, etc.).

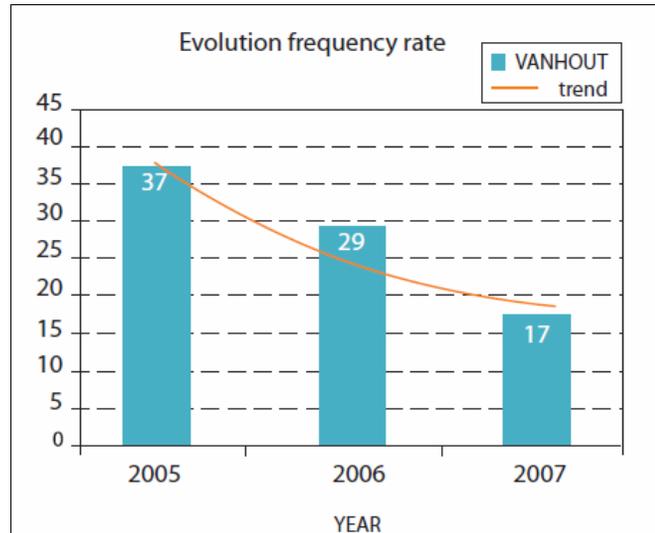
These exercises aimed at evoking reactions and attitudes, which were then analysed to find out how they can stimulate or disrupt day-to-day collaboration. This approach helped the participants further develop their skills in terms of observation, communication, attitude and dialogue. Another 12 'builders' godfathers' have since been trained so that there are 20 'builders' godfathers' available for an active workforce of 140 construction workers.

The 'builders' godfathers' stimulate communication and consultation on health and safety in the organisation especially where it concerns disadvantaged workers. This helps to promote a positive health and safety culture and secure the implementation and continued development of health and safety policy in the company.

2.4. What was achieved?

Since the project started, the frequency rate⁵¹ of occupational accidents has decreased significantly (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Evolution of frequency rate occupational accidents



The welcome brochure has become very popular within the construction sector. The Wellbeing Act states that the provision of information, instruction, training and supervision is necessary to ensure the health and safety at work of (new) employees. Through the development of the tailor-made welcome brochure new disadvantaged workers can easily be reached. The project encourages the integration of immigrants and underprivileged groups and leads to more safe and healthy employment of these specific workers.

Problems faced

Construction company workers tend to be spread over a large number of construction sites within the construction sector. This might generate communication problems. A well-structured communication plan helped to overcome this problem within the project.

Within the framework of 'diversity plans', companies and organisations from all sectors can receive subsidies from the government to set up measures and actions focused on disadvantaged groups, including workers with disabilities and older workers. However, the level of subsidy is rather low considering the efforts required on the part of the company. It is therefore likely that the company will have to invest in the project. This might be a major drawback in years of recession.

2.5. Success factors

- The commitment and enthusiasm of the management team was crucial for the realisation and success of this project.
- The PAP commission (Positive Action Plan) played an important role in keeping all stakeholders focused on the project and deadlines.
- The participants evaluated the 'builders' godfathers' training as very positive. The practical focus of the training enables participants to apply the techniques easily at the workplace.
- The project resulted in increased risk awareness among the disadvantaged workers, starting on the first day of their employment.
- The 'builders' godfathers' stimulate communication and consultation on matters of health and safety in the organisation, which helps to promote a positive health and safety culture and secure the implementation and continued development of health and safety policy in the company.

2.6. Further information

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2.7. Transferability

The concept of this project is very transferable to companies in the construction sector. Several other companies have showed their interest. The welcome brochure is even becoming a 'must-have' among builders!

3. References, resources:

- <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/TE7809894ENC>