



ROTOWORK – JOB ROTATION OF CLEANING TASKS IN A MEDICAL LABORATORY

1. Organisations involved

Hygiene Institute of the Free Hanseatic City of Hamburg

2. Description of the case

2.1. Introduction

The City of Hamburg Hygiene Institute was the major institute responsible for protecting the population against infection and infectious diseases during the period of this action. It had 250 employees and around 690 000 contacts with customers in the form of examinations, personal advice and vaccinations per year. This required hospital-like equipment and strict disinfection rules. The tasks required three groups of cleaners: cleaners for the laboratory equipment, cleaners for the employees' clothes and those responsible for room cleaning. The cleaners suffered from ailments common among cleaning personnel: MSD and skin irritations, combined with stress, low social recognition and low wages. All in all this led to a high rate of absenteeism. The employer started a project in collaboration with scientists to change the basic patterns of work organisation. The cleaning team consisted of 15 people, all female. The youngest woman was 41, and the average age was 53 years. The employer was interested in reducing absenteeism and job turnover on this team.

2.2. Aims

The aim of the action was to reduce absenteeism as far as possible and to organise the work in such a way that workers over 50 or 55 could remain in the job.

2.3. What was done, and how?

The action covered all aspects of a full risk assessment and consequent comprehensive risk reduction measures.

Analysis

The project started with a risk assessment in the form of an expert assessment followed by a survey about personal strains and a medical examination. The results were summarised according to the Finnish work ability index. The questionnaire included more than 40 questions, including an individual assessment of the worker's personal health situation.

The survey gave hints on major subjective feelings about the following aspects of the workload:

- unfavourable working hours
- awkward or extreme postures, heavy lifting
- monotonous work
- speed of work
- low cooperation and support
- relations with management
- work environment in general.

In general, most of the answers showed a relatively high degree of satisfaction. More than 70 % of the cleaners were happy with the job the supervisors did, believed the work environment was good and did not suffer from lack of recognition. The specialist assessment identified that one negative aspect of the work was equipment that required unnecessary heavy lifting or awkward postures. As regards medical evaluation, all cleaners showed functional problems of the

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musculoskeletal system and skin irritations. Using the Finnish work ability index the average figure was 42 points. This is a value between low and medium work ability (28 to 43 is medium work ability).

Intervention

The employer collaborated with the scientists to come up with interventions to reduce the risks. These interventions covered the areas of ergonomics and design and work organisation (including training).

Ergonomics, design and personal protection

The equipment was designed to reduce unnecessary strain and awkward postures. In many single aspects, improvements and effective risk reduction could be achieved. Training was offered to the workers to help them reduce the strain on the body and to avoid awkward postures and overload. The project group implemented a number of improvements:

- the equipment was made more adjustable to lighten the load;
- containers for glass or for transporting clothes were redesigned or support devices were installed to aid lifting;
- different 'ergonomic' cleaning equipment was tested and partly introduced;
- a plan for skin protection was developed.

Work organisation

The main idea of the project group was to alternate work between institutional cleaning and cleaning in the laboratory. The idea was to relieve the monotony of the work. Other more radical options were discussed but not implemented due to labour relations difficulties and possible reduction in wages.

Cleaning work in the laboratory consists of:

- supervision of all glass equipment
- disposal of special waste
- cleaning of refrigerators
- handling of dangerous substances
- supply of certain equipment (new bottles and tubes)
- quality assurance
- documentation of the work done.

Training

The cleaning staff were given training to work in the laboratory. This phase, including on-the-job training, lasted six months.

Training programme:

Week 1: Introduction to special cleaning work in the laboratory

Weeks 2 to 4: Introduction to the legal handling of dangerous substances including waste handling, handling of samples

After four weeks:

- introduction to quality assurance
- introduction to less frequent special tasks
- documentation of work in a laboratory
- maintaining the equipment service diaries.

2.4. What was achieved?

After six months the scientists of the project group developed another survey to evaluate the results. Most of the workers stated that they were very content, and the researchers concluded that the basic precondition for success was the willingness of the parties concerned to adapt to new tasks. A long-term evaluation showed that the institute is still using this system, although it has since been merged with a larger institute.

Problems faced

Job enrichment is not encouraged by the wage system. Higher wages are paid for late and early work whilst the qualified cleaning work in the laboratory is done during the daytime. Job rotation is also not supported by the inflexible wage system in the public sector, which makes it very difficult to calculate wages for a person performing very different jobs.

2.5. Success factors

The project benefited from public support by a scientific project and the stable environment of the public sector. Most of the relevant parties showed interest and motivation and there was a high level of involvement on the part of workers. The complex cleaning tasks require motivated and qualified personnel. Outsourcing of cleaning tasks to an external service company had never been an option, as it would be in many other establishments.

2.6. Further information

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2.7. Transferability

The approach has been used in other projects, such as cleaning in a hospital. The large Austrian service company DUSSMANN used the results of the project to improve the working conditions of its staff.

3. References, resources:

- <http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/reports/TEWE09001ENC>