

Sectoral approach to managing work-related stress

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Topic:

[Psychosocial work factors](#)

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About

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Author:

Irene Houtman

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For several years, the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has encouraged and co-financed a sectoral approach to risk management. The police force was one of the sectors to adopt this approach, and focused on the reduction of risks for work-related stress. Evaluation of this process showed a 10% drop in many of the risks for work-related stress; the reduction was concluded to be linked to the measures that had been taken.

In the Netherlands, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment has actively encouraged and subsidised a sectoral approach to risk management. The overall aim has been to achieve a reduction in exposure to sector-specific psychosocial and physical risks of about 10% over a period of approximately three years.

These sectoral risk management projects were called Safety and Health Covenants. The covenant can be described as a 'gentleman's agreement' between employer and employee representatives of a sector, who - in the presence and with the advice of the Ministry - agree on which risks to tackle, the approach or measures to be taken, and which specific goals are to be formulated at sectoral level. (See [full website in Dutch](#), or [summary version in English](#).)

Police sector study

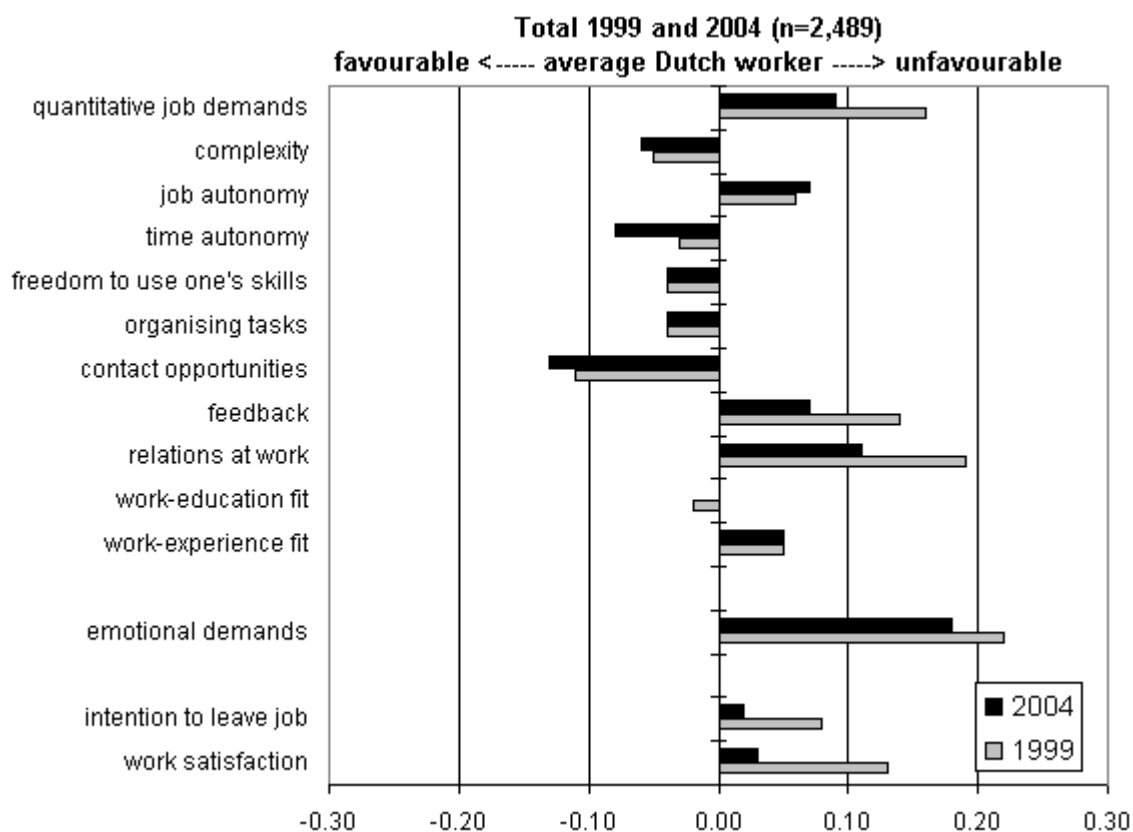
In 1999, the police sector commissioned a sector-wide study on work stress. Particular psychosocial risk factors and risk groups were identified. In consecutive collective agreements, it was agreed to set up a Safety and Health Covenant on work-related stress, using this first study as a baseline. The follow-up study was completed and presented to the sector in summer 2005.

In 1999, a random sample of about 10,000 police officers was drawn and, in October 2004, a further random sample of 5,000 police officers. Response rates were 53% and 51% respectively. (See [police website \(in Dutch\)](#) where report can be downloaded.)

Psychosocial risk profile

Figure 1 illustrates the psychosocial risk profile of the police in 1999 and in 2004. It shows that the main psychosocial risks had decreased except for decision authority and the fit between work and work experience. Despite this reduction in many of the psychosocial risks, the general pattern remained the same. Compared with the average employee in the Netherlands, police officers have higher psychological demands, less autonomy, and greater problems regarding feedback, emotional workload and in their relations with colleagues and superiors. In addition, more unfavourable than average ratings were found for the match between experience obtained and needed at work, intention to leave, and job satisfaction.

Figure 1: Risk profile of general psychosocial risks, policing sector, 1999 and 2004



Managing risk and work-related stress

Table 1 shows the proportion of police men and women stating that risk reduction measures were offered to them at their workplace, and the effectiveness they attributed to the measures taken. The

police departments were free to request support from their Occupational Health Service or other professionals regarding the management of absence and return to work, or in relation to other issues identified as problematic within the department.

Measures to manage work-related stress were offered as frequently as more general health promotional (life style) activities, and somewhat less frequently than (general) sickness absence measures and measures directed at a return to work. However, the police officers rated the work-related stress measures as less effective, compared with the two other measures.

Measures aimed at managing aggression and violence appeared not to be widely available but, when offered, they were rated as effective relatively often. It appears that these measures were offered to a very specific group of police personnel, which explains why a high percentage of police did not report these measures being offered to them.

Measures regarding repetitive strain injuries and capacity management were reported even less often and were rated as effective by an even smaller group. In general, large differences were found between the different police departments regarding the effectiveness of the measures (see [report - 1.1Mb; in Dutch](#)).

Table 1: Measures taken and their effectiveness, as rated by police officers

Measures taken and their effectiveness, as rated by police officers

MEASURES DIRECTED AT	OFFERED (%)	RATED AS EFFECTIVE (%)
Sickness absence and return to work	51	59
Work-related stress	41	40
Health promotion (life style)	41	62
Aggression and violence	30	62
Repetitive strain injuries (RSI)	24	46
Capacity management (reducing irregular work)	19	32

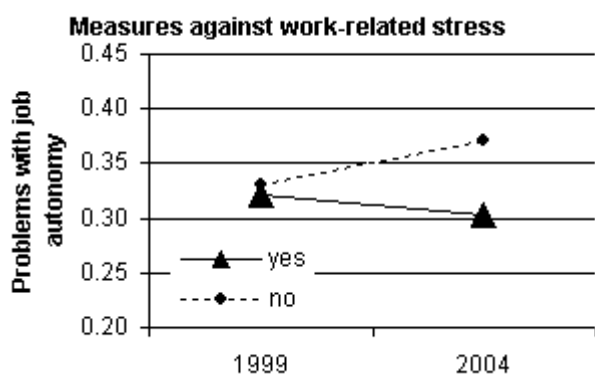
Risk reduction

In order to assess whether the measures taken were related to the subsequent reduction in risks, analyses were performed assuming that the 1999 sample could be linked to the 2004 sample, on the basis of employees mapping specific jobs in a specific department in 1999 and 2004.

Figure 2 illustrates an example of the relation between preventative measures and risk reduction. It shows that police officers who reported that measures combating work-related stress were taken or offered to them in the period between 1999 and 2004 had equal problem levels with job autonomy in 1999 but less problems in 2004, compared with the group that claimed that none of these measures had been taken.

Favourable changes related to work-related stress measures, as shown in Figure 2, were also found for time-related autonomy, freedom to use one's skills, problems in organising one's work, and in feedback, emotional workload and contacts with colleagues and supervisor.

Figure 2: Work-related stress measures, in relation to autonomy



Conclusion

The study concludes that the psychosocial risk profile of the police in 2004 is comparable to that in 1999, although a significant reduction of over 10% was found in the most significant risk factors. Many measures have been taken to manage work-related stress, such as courses, individual training and coaching activities, as well as organisational changes to increase individual control. Some of the employees experiencing these measures rated them as effective, although large differences were found between police departments and between occupational groups.

Despite the restrictions of the study design, it is plausible that the measures taken are related to the reduction in risks observed. Nonetheless, 80% of the employees were of the opinion that measures to manage work-related stress could have been, and can be, more effective.

Author: Irene Houtman