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TNO Prevention and Health
Division Work and Health

Wassenaarseweg 56
PO Box 2215
2301 CE Leiden
The Netherlands

Phone +31 71 518 18 18
Fax +31 71 518 19 20

Health and Safety: Voluntary Schemes in a European Context

A report summarising the Dutch contribution to
the project during January-October 1995

author(s):
C.V. van Vuuren
R.W.M. Gründemann

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SUMMARY

This report provides a summary of the Dutch contribution to the project titled "Health and Safety: Voluntary Schemes in a European Context" during January till October 1995. The project investigates the feasibility of a voluntary scheme for health and safety recognition and improvement for small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The project is being undertaken by the Centre for Hazard and Risk Management (CHaRM) of Loughborough University of Technology. This in collaboration with the University of Valencia and the TNO Institute of Preventive Health Care (TNO Prevention and Health: TNO-PG) in the Netherlands. The project is partially EC funded.

This document summarises the three activities carried out by TNO-PG in relation to the project. These activities were to give an overview of the developments concerning Health & Safety matters in the Netherlands, to held interviews with key-persons of Dutch SMEs and to do a secondary analysis on data obtained in a study among 187 Dutch organisations about Health & Safety policy in the Netherlands.

On basis of a review of the developments concerning Health & Safety matters in the Netherlands it is concluded that the most important Dutch H & S development in relation to this project is the emendation of the Dutch working condition act in the beginning of 1994. Dutch employers are now obliged to assess the risks within the working environment. They also have to make clear what measures are to be implemented if risks in the working environment are to be decreased. This means that in contrary to the companies in most other EU-countries, the Dutch companies do not assess the H & S risks in their company on a voluntary basis. However they are free to choose their own health and safety audit scheme to do this.

The interviews held with some key-persons of SMEs show that the attitude of SME employers is rather passive at this moment. The use of H & S audit scheme by SMEs is low. SMEs will only carry out risk assessment if they can foresee immediate results.

The results of the secondary analysis confirms in general the opinion of the interviewed key-persons. However the attitude of the small-sized companies was considerable more passive and the degree they had carried out risk-assessments was remarkably less than of medium-sized companies (50-500 employees).

Medium-sized companies behave in many aspects the same as large companies.

It is therefore concluded that concerning the feasibility of an H & S audit scheme it is important to focus on the development of specific health and safety audits for small-sized companies. Even in the Netherlands where employers are legally obliged to carry out risk assessments, the use of health and safety schemes is low among small-sized companies. A good and easy-to-use scheme is feasible to encourage H & S auditing in these small organisations.

1. DEVELOPMENTS CONCERNING HEALTH & SAFETY MATTERS IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands has about 15 million inhabitants. The working labour force in 1994 was about 5.9 million persons (60% male and 40% female). About 70% is working in the services sector; 18% in industry, 7% in the building industry, 4% in agriculture, etc. In the Netherlands an absenteeism percentage exists of about 8%, which means 8% of the working time is lost because of unfitness to work due to illness or infirmity. The maximum period of benefit for sickness absenteeism is 52 weeks; in UK this is 28 weeks. About one third of the total number of days comes from absences longer than six months. The number of people declared disabled for work and receiving a work disability benefit is 920.000, which is 14% of the labour force. The yearly costs for benefits for sickness absenteeism and disability are NLF 32 billion (15 billion ECU).

The most important legislation with respect to the quality of working life is the Working Conditions Act. This act was passed in parliament in 1980, but it took ten years for it to be fully implemented. The working conditions act aims to increase levels of safety in the workplace and improve the physical and mental health and well-being of employees. The act is primarily an enabling act. It is essentially a framework which forms a basis for more detailed decrees. This kind of framework legislation sets down general principles for operation rather than listing specific provisions for specific situations. It stipulates basic standards for physical and psychosocial aspects of the working environment. Self-regulation is an important concept in this act. Concern for safety and health protection is generally placed with the employer. The employer is responsible for the working environment and has to cooperate with the employee who also has his obligations. The employee has to work according the health and safety instructions.

As a result of the European Framework Directive on Health and Safety and new Dutch legislation connected with preventing absenteeism and disability the Dutch working conditions act has been amended in the beginning of 1994. An important change oblige employers to assess the risks within the working environment. They also have to make clear what measures are to be implemented if risks in the working environment are to be decreased. Employers will have to engage professional help on matters of health, safety and well-being.

The amended act stipulates that all employers must pursue a working conditions policy which, among other things, aims at preventing sickness absenteeism. One significant element of this policy

is that it must be based on a complete assessment of the relevant occupational hazards, plus a sound evaluation of those hazards. The risk assessment should be used as the basis for this choice.

Other legal requirements are for example:

- the assessment must be based upon recent opinions on health, safety and wellbeing;
- the assessment may be broad, unless the nature of the risks demands a more thorough approach;
- the assessment must take into account the situation of special groups as younger and older workers, pregnant women, ethnic minorities and invalid workers.

One of the current health and safety schemes in the Netherlands - the Inspection Methodology for the Working Conditions - is developed by TNO in cooperation with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. This methodology can be used by (health and safety) specialists for the evaluation of the working environment according to the Dutch Working Conditions Act and for choosing the measures to improve it.

The methodology has 15 different chapters. One chapter deals with the organisational structure for the prevention of health and safety of the employees and another with the general provisions for health and safety. In the other chapters specific risk factors are presented, for example the in- and outdoor climate; the physical workload; gasses, vapours and dust; vibrations; the job content and the mental workload; noise pollution; lighting; and the organization of the workplace. One of the last developed chapters is about sickness absenteeism. Each chapter contains three levels. On the first level the most frequent critical situations are identified. On the second level possible measures are presented for the solution of the critical situation. The third level contains criteria to be applied, in the form of legal requirements, standards and/or guidelines.

The Inspection Methodology for the Working Conditions is one of the general instruments in the Netherlands. Besides these general instruments applied risk assessments have been developed for industrial sectors, for example the motorcar sector (garages; gas stations; breaker's yards; driving schools), ambulance transport; thatchers; cleaning services etc. These are meant to be used by employers.

2. INTERVIEWS WITH KEY-PERSONS OF DUTCH SMES

Six interviews were held with key-persons of Dutch SMEs. Three interviews were held with employers, one with the primary occupational physician of a National Health Services for the retail services sector, one with two advisors for working conditions of a counselling body for SMEs, one interview with the secretary of the employers' organisation for the SMEs.

Because of the recent developments in the legislation on sickness absenteeism and working conditions in the Netherlands, the attitude of SME employers to Health & Safety issues is rather passive at this moment. It takes a lot of the employers energy to fulfil the new obligations. The secretary of the employers' organisation for the SMEs let known that the SMEs are fed up with all the new obligations. The SMEs have in his opinion difficulties enough to survive. That is the reason why many employers wait for an order of the Labour Inspectorate to do the legally obliged risk assessment.

The employers consider the employees themselves responsible for their own health and safety at work. Health is a private matter: "At the workplace people come to work, not to improve their health." Even workrelated health problems are interpreted as an individual vulnerability of the employee. The employers are however prepared to invest in matters of Health & Safety in case of major changes in the working process or the working conditions like for instance a new building.

The employers update themselves on H & S issues mainly by attending information meetings and reading newsletters and other information coming from their industrial organisations. The quickest way to inform them, according to our informants, is to publish in the "Telegraaf" the largest newspaper in the Netherlands.

The SME-employers expect mainly economic benefits from good H & S management. They presume there will be less absenteeism, which mean lesser costs and lower premium for the insurance on sickness absenteeism benefit. Besides that they expect more productivity and less turnover as a consequence of a well carried out H & S policy. The last economic benefit mentioned was that it will be easier to produce in time. The two advisors for working conditions of a counselling body for SMEs mentioned that a company with good H & S management will earn a positive reputation. The owner of a thatcher company confirmed this and told us that this is especially the case among customers from the public sector.

SMEs want recognition if they succeed in improving their standards of H & S. This is good for the motivation of the employees and the employer. Some key-persons think the employers like to get something they can show (i.e. a certificate). While others say the SMEs prefer a reduction of the sickness-premium as recognition and not something like a certificate.

The use of H & S schemes by SMEs is low. One of the main reasons was according to our informants that SMEs are not used to work systematically, they work on an ad-hoc basic. They will only carry out risk assessments if they can foresee immediate advantages like that it solves a problem they have at that moment.

The employers among our key-persons are in general more positive about the effects of H & S policy than the representatives of SME-organisations. However the interviewed employers are probably a positive selection of the population of SME-employers. All employers carried out H & S activities, which is not in general the case (see section 3).

3. SECONDARY ANALYSIS ON DATA ABOUT HEALTH & SAFETY POLICY IN THE NETHERLANDS

A secondary analysis is done of data obtained in a study among 187 Dutch organisations (Goudswaard, Van den Heuvel & Van Putten, 1995). In the beginning of 1995 interviews by telephone were held with the persons who were in charge for Health and Safety matters in the companies. The subject of the interviews was about the compliance with the new legal obligations to do a risk assessment and to have an health and safety and absenteeism policy. Two different types of organisations and two different sizes were investigated i.e. health organisations and metal- and electrotechnical companies with less than 100 employees and more than 100 employees (large companies).

Table 3.1 Response divided in type of organisation and size

	< 100	> 100	Total
Health organisations			
Sample size	153	83	236
Number of interviews	36	51	87
Response percentage	24%	61%	37%
Metal- and Electrotechnical industry			
Sample size	133	95	228
Number of interviews	50	50	100
Response percentage	38%	53%	44%
Total			
Sample size	286	178	464
Number of interviews	86	101	187
Response percentage	30%	57%	40%

The choice for these type of organisations is made, because these are the first organisations in the Netherlands who are obliged to make use of the new kind of occupational health service (arbodienst). The aim was to held 50 interviews in every category, which meant 50 in the small metal- and electrotechnical firms, 50 in the large metal- and electrotechnical companies, 50 in the small health organisations and 50 in the large health organisations.

Table 3.1 show that the total response is 40% percent. The response is the lowest among the smallest companies. This might indicate that small companies have little interest in H & S matters. It can also mean that the results are slightly positive biased: the companies which are more interested in H & S matters, are likely to participate more.

For the secondary analysis we redivided the companies in three sizes: small (less than 50 employees), medium-sized (between 50 and 500 employees) and large companies (more than 500 employees). We had 75 small, 78 medium-sized and 33 large companies.

The study gives information about the views of small, medium-sized and large organisations on factors motivating managers to maintain of improve health and safety.

Besides that the study concerns the awareness of health and safety obligations, on the compliance with the legal obligation to do a risk assessment and on health and safety schemes.

4. RESULTS

Table 4.1 shows that the awareness of the new health and safety obligations in small-sized companies is less than in medium-sized and large companies. For instance almost one third of the small-sized companies could not mention spontaneously one of the many legal H & S obligations.

Table 4.1 Awareness of health and safety obligations

	small-sized companies (N = 75)	medium-sized companies (N = 78)	large companies (N = 33)
Familiar with new H & S obligations *	91%	99%	100%
Mentioned spontaneously obligation to pursue working conditions policy	12%	12%	18%
Mentioned spontaneously obligation to carry out risk assessment *	24%	49%	52%
Mentioned spontaneously obligation to draw up plan of action with measures to improve working conditions	10%	14%	15%
Mentioned spontaneously no H & S obligations at all *	29%	9%	3%
Knew obligation to carry out risk assessment *	75%	97%	100%
Knew obligation to draw up plan of action with measures to improve working conditions *	76%	99%	100%

* significant $p < .05$

Table 4.2 demonstrates significant differences between the small-, medium-sized and large companies in their judgement about the legal obligations to carry out a risk assessment and to draw up a plan of action with measures to improve the working conditions. The small-sized companies had the least positive view about the legal obligation to carry out a risk assessment, followed by the medium-sized companies who were a little less positive than the large companies. Same differences existed concerning the judgement about the legal obligation to draw up a plan of action. However this judgement was in general slightly more positive than about the obligation to carry out a risk assessment.

Table 4.2 reports further the differences in the degree the organisation fulfil the obligations to carry out a risk assessment and to draw up a plan of action with measures to improve the working conditions and in the degree they actual took measures to improve health and safety in the organisation. These differences confirms the preceding dissimilarities. However the differences are less big concerning the factual measures undertaken than concerning the carried out risk assessments and drawn up plans of action .

Table 4.2 Risk assessment, plan of action and measures to improve the working conditions

	small-sized companies (N = 75)	medium-sized companies (N = 78)	large companies (N = 33)
Positive judgement about legal obligations to carry out a risk assessment *	55%	83%	88%
Positive judgement about legal obligations to draw up a plan of action with measures to improve the working conditions *	59%	86%	97%
A risk assessment has been carried out *	32%	82%	88%
A plan of action with measures to improve working conditions has been drawn up *	45%	85%	91%
Concrete measures has been taken to improve working conditions *	72%	91%	94%

* significant $p < .05$

Almost no significant differences were found in the experience of the companies with risk assessment (see table 4.3).

Table 4.3 Experience with risk assessment

	small-sized companies (N = 24)	medium-sized companies (N = 64)	large companies (N = 29)
Written risk assessment carried out	92%	98%	100%
Risk assessment already carried out before 1995	67%	59%	59%
Risk assessment carried out in 1995 (or still busy)	33%	41%	41%
Risk assessment carried out by company itself *	63%	23%	28%
Workers council consulted about the preparation and completion of risk assessment	88%	81%	100%
Existed scheme used for risk assessment	58%	73%	86%
Self-develop scheme used	13%	17%	7%
No scheme used *	13%	-	-
Scheme unknown	17%	16%	7%

* significant $p < .05$

The only significant differences concern the degree that the risk assessment was carried out by the company itself and if the company used a scheme at all to carry out the risk assessment. Interestingly is that risk assessments are much more carried out by small-sized organisations themselves and moreover they are more likely to do this without any audit scheme at all than medium-sized and large organisations.

Table 4.4 Experience with Plan of Action to reduce risks

	small-sized companies (N = 34)	medium-sized companies (N = 66)	large companies (N = 30)
Plan of action already drawn up before 1995	59%	42%	47%
Plan of action drawn up in 1995 (or still busy)	41%	58%	53%
Workers council consulted about plan of action *	68%	91%	97%

* significant $p < .05$

Table 4.4 shows that the companies did not differ in the period they drawn up a plan of action to reduce H & S risks. However they did vary in the degree they consulted the workers council about this plan of action.

Table 4.5 reports the degree the companies pursued a working conditions policy and the possession of a structural budget to implement measures to improve the working conditions.

Table 4.5 Working conditions policy and budget

	small-sized companies (N = 75)	medium-sized companies (N = 78)	large companies (N = 33)
Working conditions policy pursued	55%	94%	97%
Working conditions budget	11%	41%	67%

* significant $p < .05$

The small-sized companies implemented significantly the least this policy (55%) and the degree of implementation of the medium-sized companies was little less (94%) than of the large companies (97%). A same (significant) difference exists between the small-sized, medium-sized and large companies in the degree they had a structural budget to carry out measures and investments to improve the working conditions. Of the small-sized companies 11% had such a budget, of the medium-sized companies 41% and two third of the large companies. The organisations who did pursue a working conditions policy were asked about their reasons to do so. Table 4.6 demonstrates that there are no significant differences in the spontaneously mentioned reasons to implement a working condition policy. The only difference is that much more small-sized companies mentioned no reasons at all than medium-sized and large companies.

Table 4.6 Spontaneously mentioned reasons to pursue working conditions policy

	small-sized companies (N = 41)	medium-sized companies (N = 73)	large companies (N = 32)
Reduces sickness absenteeism	22%	27%	28%
Reduces disability		1%	
Reduces costs of premium	5%	3%	
Enlarges staff motivation	2%	14%	16%
Provides positive company image		4%	
Improves working conditions	22%	36%	31%
Improves staff morale	12%	12%	16%
Improves productivity		3%	6%
To comply with legal obligations	46%	48%	50%
Reduces staff turnover			3%
Other reason	5%	7%	6%
No reasons mentioned	51%	9%	6%

* significant $p < .05$

The companies were also asked if they did pursue a sickness absenteeism policy which means a written and implemented policy statement concerning the rules how to report sick, how to control the ill employees and how to support the ill employees. Less than 50% of the small-sized companies carried out such a policy against almost every medium-sized or large company. The companies who did have a sickness absenteeism policy and/or a working conditions policy were asked if these policies have a positive, negative or no effect on several outcomes. Table 4.7 reports the results.

Table 4.7 Positive effects of sickness absenteeism and/or working conditions policy

	small-sized companies (N = 51)	medium-sized companies (N = 76)	large companies (N = 33)
Staff productivity *	31%	49%	61%
Product quality *	29%	51%	55%
Sick absenteeism *	33%	76%	88%
Disability *	10%	43%	39%
Vocational rehabilitation possibilities *	22%	58%	70%
Staff turnover	20%	17%	21%
Staff morale	49%	63%	67%
Staff motivation *	53%	72%	73%
Staff complaints *	28%	57%	55%

* significant $p < .05$

Small companies see remarkable less positive effects of a sickness absenteeism and/or working condition policy than the bigger companies.

5. CONCLUSIONS

On basis of the overview of the developments concerning Health & Safety matters in the Netherlands it is concluded that the most important Dutch H & S development in relation to this project is the emendation of the Dutch working condition act. As a result of the European Framework Directive on Health and Safety and new Dutch legislation connected with preventing absenteeism and disability the Dutch working conditions act has been amended in the beginning of 1994. An important change oblige employers to assess the risks within the working environment. They also have to make clear what measures are to be implemented if risks in the working environment are to be decreased. They will have to engage professional help on matters of health, safety and well-being. The amended act stipulates that all employers must pursue a working conditions policy which, among other things, aims at preventing sickness absenteeism. One significant element of this policy is that it must be based on a complete assessment of the relevant occupational hazards, plus a sound evaluation of those hazards. The risk assessment should be used as the basis for this choice.