

Reduced work-related stress in the hotel and restaurant sector

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Work-related stress in the hotel and restaurant sector in the Netherlands declined by 13.2% in the four-year period between 2000 and 2004, partly due to a tripartite voluntary covenant on reducing work-related stress. The parties involved were the employer organisations and trade unions active in the sector, as well as the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment. When the covenant period ended in 2004, the Ministry withdrew its immediate involvement, and the social partners continued with a new and promising way of working together.

Covenant on work-related stress

During the last 10 years, the Dutch Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment developed an extensive sectoral approach to risk management. Many sectors participated over the period, with the social partners in each sector and the Ministry sharing responsibility for the interventions and the costs. The Ministry paid for the preparation and evaluation of the risk management. In 2000, the hotel and restaurant sector joined this initiative by concluding a voluntary covenant on the reduction of work-related stress. The participating parties set a target of reducing work stress by 10%, to be achieved by a step-by-step intervention strategy set out in the covenant.

In the four-year period of the covenant, the tripartite intervention group undertook a detailed analysis of the problem of work-related stress in the sector. The group then prepared various means of disseminating knowledge on work-related stress and intervention methods. These included developing a short checklist of indicators and a number of measures to reduce work-related stress at a personal and organisational level; launching a website (www.happyhoreca.nl (in Dutch)); introducing a seminar on coping with aggression; and a pilot project in eight companies aimed at creating a 'toolbox' for stress reduction. Because of the large numbers of organisations and employees in the sector, it was decided to develop self-help manuals to assist organisations and employees in solving stress-related problems on their own. These manuals were published and disseminated during 2003. Considerable promotional exposure was gained by launching a newspaper and presenting good practice awards.

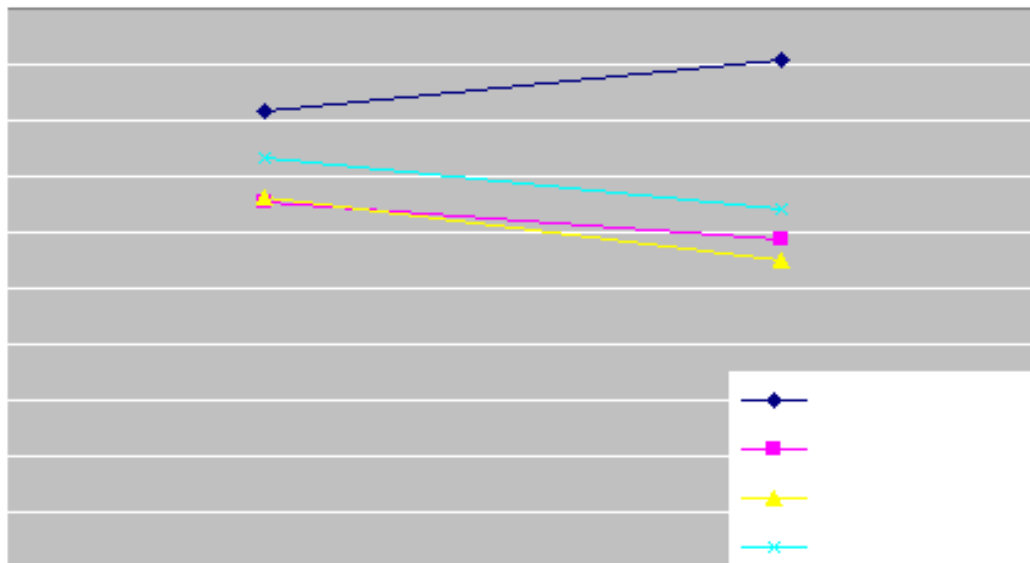
Evaluating the covenant

In 2000, TNO (Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research) conducted a survey among a random sample of 8,000 employees in the hotel and restaurant sector by means of a questionnaire. It was strongly felt by the covenant partners that work-related stress in the hotel and restaurant sector differs from stress in other sectors. In cooperation with the social partners, therefore, TNO developed a tailor-made questionnaire, reflecting the work-related stress characteristic of four groups of employees: receptionists, waiting staff, kitchen staff and 'other groups' (managers, chambermaids, maintenance staff).

The study was repeated after four years. A new sample of employees was drawn, consisting of 13,000 potential respondents, because people in the Netherlands are nowadays less inclined to participate in questionnaire research. Of these employees, 18% responded and fully completed the questionnaire (n=2,345). As was done for the first sample, this second group also closely represented the population characteristics of the sector.

Reduced stress and costs

The figure below shows the changing proportion of respondents in the four occupational groups indicating a high level of work-related stress over the period of 2000 to 2004.



In three of the four occupational groups, the percentage of employees indicating a high level of work-related stress significantly diminished. The reduction was 10.1% among kitchen staff, 16.9% among waiting staff, and 12.5% among the other groups. The rise of 11% among receptionists reporting a high level of work stress was not statistically significant because of the small number of receptionists studied (162 in 2000 and 140 in 2004). Nevertheless, the percentage of receptionists reporting high work-related stress in both years is considerable, and calls for more and specific action in the future. The total reduction of employees reporting work-related stress for the entire hotel and restaurant sector during the covenant period was 13.2%, which is significant.

In addition, the cost savings of reduced levels of sickness absence due to work-related stress over the four-year period were estimated. Each respondent was asked to report his or her sickness absence in the year preceding the completion of the questionnaire, and whether this absence related to work stress. Using the number of employees in the sector, their average income level (both figures available from population statistics), and the estimated number of days lost due to work stress per employee, the average costs of this sickness absence per employee could be calculated for the whole sector. In 2000, the total costs for the sector were estimated to be as high as €27 million. In 2004, the costs were calculated at €20 million. This amounts to a reduction of €7 million, or 26%. At the same time, the covenant partners calculated the total costs of the covenant to be, by comparison, just €1.8 million.

In 2004, 4.3% of the respondents indicated that they were familiar with the campaign and 2.8% were familiar with at least one of the self-help manuals. Considering that these tools had only been available since 2003, this degree of dissemination was considered to be a good start. The social partners have stated that they will continue to further develop and implement these methods, with the aim of effecting a further reduction of stress in the workplace.

Conclusions

The most important benefits of the covenant were identified as:

- the cooperation of three parties with the aim of reducing the number of employees reporting high work stress by at least 10%;
- the development of specific sets of indicators for measuring work stress by questioning the parties involved;
- the development of a multitude of intervention strategies.

More information on the [covenant approach](#) in the Netherlands is available. See also its implementation in the policing sector ([NL0512NU01](#)).

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