

PROGRAMME FOR SAFETY IN SMALL COMPANIES

Dr. Jacques T. Allegro, Dutch Institute for the Working Environment, Holland

I would like to develop an experience gained in the approach to SMEs from the Netherlands. In the case of SMEs there should be a systematic approach to safety and health with one which is adopted to their specific requirements and Mr. Bibbings has already referred to that.

Before I start I would like to make clear that I will not only talk about safety and health, but I will talk about working conditions, and that implies safety and health as well as the quality of work and I will develop on that later in my talk.

I will start with a number of recommendations we got from the Netherlands. In the first place it has been stated several times that safety and health costs have benefits. Other speakers have emphasised that the company with healthy and safe workers is also a flexible and productive company. In other words, emphasised that costs are set off by benefits and a well know example in Holland is a diskette produced by my Institute which makes it possible to easily calculate in SMEs the cost of an absenteeism policy and also what this can be expected to yield. This demonstrates that even relatively small reduction in absenteeism is sufficient to earn back the costs.

In the second place, I would like to emphasise, and that was in Mr. Bibbing's speech too, keep it simple, make it clear that even relatively simple measures can generate results. The emphasis is not on larger scale programmes talking about SMEs but rather to implement health and safety improvements in day to day practice and changes in better operations are going to be made anyway. For instance for changing special ergonomic chairs, the new chairs have to be bought in any case. Such an approach to health and safety improvements implemented when changes have already been planned has been worked out systematically in Holland in the social so called manual for SMEs, specially developed for the metal sector.

Another approach is the method developed by the Finnish Institute for Occupational Health referred to in English as the "good housekeeping" method. It is very significant also, it is a specially developed method. It is one that is very attractive, owing to its simplicity. This method was not developed specifically for the improvement of health and safety. It was more concerned with improving working conditions in general, but nevertheless, it did influence safety and health and to make it clear it is a very easy method to implement in small and medium sized companies.

It is not a method implemented and made for the big companies. But sometimes it is not possible to do it in the simple way and then it is interesting to combine it with other, sometimes more complex developments which have to be implemented in any case. Already this morning it was referred to several times that safety and health has to be integrated in the normal business operation. In the enterprise, this particularly concerns improvement related to quality, environment and working conditions and often by integrating these three areas we get excellent results.

I will give an example of this and that is from a very small business. The hairdresser sector. In the hairdresser sector dermatitis is a well known problem. It constitutes about 50% of disablement costs. This results from the fact that the chemical substances required for a "perm" are not dealt with correctly. (Often these chemical substances are simply discharged into the sewage system thereby harming the external environment). Therefore this issue, the chemical substances concerns health as well as environmental problem. By developing a single protocol for the proper way of handling these chemicals, two important goals can be achieved and this has been achieved in the sector. It is very interesting that they have linked it, not only to the environment but to quality and logistics too. What I would like to emphasise is that here too the sector organisation as an intermediate organisation has played a very important role. I will come back to that later.

When I talk about health and safety, I would like to emphasise that it is more than health and safety. It has also to do with, what was referred to here in the information stand as welfare, that I would like to refer to it as the content of work. Because if I am not focusing on the content of work then a very important aspect of working conditions can be swept under the carpet. When referring to the work content, I mean the work people do hour after hour and day after day. This aspect also involves a close relationship with stress and workload. These are the health aspects, at least in Holland, which are deteriorating most rapidly, and as far as I know also in other European countries. To give a single number, it appears in the Netherlands that about 30% of new disability cases are diagnosed as physiological disorders related to work stress. I got the impression elsewhere in Europe it is not much better.

Another example of the impact of work content has been connected to working in SMEs again. There is project we have carried out in the car body repair shop. A sector again connected with many small businesses. The problem here was that many well trained young people left the sector soon after completing their training. In addition, in that sector there appeared to be a need for a higher quality and a greater flexibility in production. A close analysis showed that there was evidence of incomplete functions with limited autonomy and too few organised tasks. So the young workers had been trained to a higher level and they could not turn that into practice. Subsequently in

consultation with management and personnel, projects with task enrichment and proper scope and a different management style were initiated in eight businesses. The results as regards quality of work as well as absenteeism and quality were positive and what is important in this introduction again here a sector organisation played a very important role.

In the last place, I would like to refer to the multi-media and at the same time I agree with Mr. Bibbings that perhaps the entrepreneurs, people in SMEs get much too much information. At the same time it is quite clear when talking about information, we talk not only about the written information but television, videos and all kinds of existing networks as these are very important to get the message over to the entrepreneurs.

Now I would like to dwell upon the sector approach to working conditions. The examples given previously, clearly demonstrate that the sectoral approach to problems concerning health and safety and obviously other issues as well is excellently suited to SMEs in particular. I will explain that in greater detail, but first, I will give a definition.

What are sector organisations? Sector organisations are defined as national organisations, organised per sector that serve social and economic interests. In Holland, there are several hundred, perhaps thousands of them. For instance, Employers Organisations, Trade Unions, Product Boards and Training and Development Organisations. What do they do ?

There are quite a lot of activities. They focus on data collection and data management in the sector. They do quite a lot of training. They care for external consultations, for instance, the collective bargaining agreements. They provide advice and support to the members and they commission research, and now the question is, what do they do with regard to working conditions ?

The sector organisations are important in this field for the following reasons. There are quite a lot of sector related working conditions demanding specific solutions. Now it is not necessary that each company again reinvents the wheel, you can do it collectively. In the second place, the sector organisations are important because the enforcement of employer organisations and of unions enhances the chances of success. In the third place, sector organisations often have better financing opportunities through collective bargaining agreements. Especially with respect to SMEs. Smaller companies are often more accessible via the sector or Branch Organisations. Another interesting question is, why are sector organisation interested in working conditions ?

In Holland at least we see that Government is retrenching. They say we don't do it any more. We are only active in the legislation. We will not be active anymore in consultations and you, the sectors, you have to assume the responsibility for improving working conditions. That is one development. The other development is that the companies and the sectors themselves become more and more interested in working conditions because of the following reasons, in Holland, we have quite a problem with absenteeism and disability. To give an example, looking at the national figures, we have about 80% of absenteeism. We have more than 14% of people who get a disability pension. That means that they are ill for more than one year so that means that in Holland we have quite a number of people not working perhaps not in the un-employed sector, but because of our social insurance system, they have come into the disability system. So absenteeism and disablement are important problems and because of these problems, SMEs and branch organisations become more and more interested.

At the same time, there are also in some branches, a macro problem, very important legislation on working conditions changing on national and European level, and last but not least, there is a growing significance of the environment and quality management.

A more detailed picture of what sector organisations do, can be seen from the following results:-

Looking at research in Holland about the concrete activities developed by sector organisations, It becomes quite clear that a large number of activities have been undertaken. But they have not been undertaken systematically, and they have often been undertaken only with a limited frequency. About 5% of the total available manpower in this field in the branch organisations, is devoted to activities around working conditions, but at the same time, the impact of branch organisations is much greater as a result of activities in collective bargaining agreements. In this bargaining agreement, is a very important development, more and more agreements have to do with improvements of policy on absenteeism, improvements of policy on integration of the long-term disabled people and on improving working conditions in a more preventive way.

Other sources in Holland, demonstrate that a significant growing number of activities are undertaken by sector organisations, for instance, we have quite a lot of sector organisations working groups who look for the improvement of working conditions. We see that more and more seminars and conferences are organised by sector organisations.

What I think is even more important, is that in special sectors with a higher risk, there were, in the past, special institutes founded, who look after safety and health and working environment problems. For instance, in the construction industry and transport and in agriculture. At the same time not only looking at Dutch national level,

but at the international context too, we see that they are more and more interested in branch organisations. For instance, the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions is now finishing a report on working conditions within the various sectors. The Report I am referring to is the Research Project of Working conditions in hospitals, and it is now addressing the meat processing industry. Both sectors are described in a report that will be published in a few months.

The last point I would like to emphasise, has to do with a more specific sector orientated approach. If we want to look more closely at the value of specific sector approaches, we have to look at the so called sector branch projects.

One project for instance, is making a manual on risk assessment, which is taken on then by a special work group within a branch. An evaluation shows that there are often very positive results of finishing this manual and having it applied. But the problem is that it is often accepted in the Pilot company but even if it is accepted in the Pilot company, we still do not know exactly, and here there is a lack of research, how you get from the Pilot companies, say from the 10 out of the thousand into the other 990 companies.

To summarise, I feel that I am justified in saying that in the approach to SMEs. A sector orientated approach has great potential. However, it is essential that the SMEs concerned are actively involved in the setting up and implementation of projects. If not, only the managers of sectoral organisations will benefit.