

The Municipality of The Hague's Facility Department and its WHP Policy

Background

The Municipality of The Hague's Facility Department (FAD) focuses on the provision of support services. The FAD has a policy of Workplace Health Promotion (WHP policy) appropriate to its good working climate and its low rate of employee turnover. Its workload can be effectively distributed due to the great amount of leeway granted to the assignment of tasks and to an effective employee training and development plan. In recent years, the operation of the department has become more systematized. While production has increased, social cohesion has not only been retained but increased as well: management and colleagues are attentive to one another's needs.

The FAD is responsible for the support processes carried on among its 17 divisions: Purchasing, Financial Management, Management of Other Buildings, Security & Surveillance (RBT), Personnel Systems, City Hall Management, Construction & Project Development, Multimedia, Logistics, Implementation & Maintenance, Catering Facilities, Policy and Management Affairs, and Personnel Training and Development (TOCO).

The department employs 400 persons, almost one-third of them being women. About 60% of all employees is older than 45.

Working conditions policy

The working conditions services are supplied by the Arbo Unie. The Work-

ing Conditions Committee is responsible for advising and supporting the management in regard to matters involving working conditions. The FAD's memorandum for managing working conditions lists three focal points for working conditions management:

- absenteeism
- the role of supervisors
- informing employees about the safe, proper use of computers

The Working Conditions Committee has drawn up a Workplace Health Promotion Plan that provides yet more information, especially in regard to the importance of exercise.

Special characteristics

In recent years, the municipality has become increasingly business-oriented while devoting decidedly more attention to personnel matters. In general, the FAD is contributing much to a positive working climate. Certain divisions quite obviously enjoy a pleasant working atmosphere.

Project infrastructure

The department has various consultative structures with regard to occupational health policy: the Working Conditions Committee, the central and decentralized social medical teams, and the SamenWerken Project Group that focuses on improving the cooperation between colleagues and divisions, including the optimizing of internal communications. Represented in the Working Conditions Committee are delegates from the working conditions ser-

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vice/industrial medical officer, the working conditions policy official/company social worker, the working conditions coordinator, the environmental management coordinator, the employees' council, and Human Resources Management.

Although the Management Team has approved a memorandum for managing working conditions as this pertains to the Facility Department, the attention devoted to these matters actually goes further than the requirements stated in this document. A plan related to smoking, stress and exercise has been formulated in regard to WHP; although the total plan was considered somewhat overly ambitious to implement all at once, its section on exercise has actually been expanded upon. A special policy concerning aggression has also been drawn up.

There is a generous budget for a working conditions policy that includes a package for dealing with absenteeism (EUR 90,000 for 400 employees) plus enough funding for extras, e.g. EUR 30,000 extra for WHP activities. There has never been an occasion in which something has not been carried out because there was no funding, but the time it takes to participate in WHP activities is sometimes a problem.

The organization of workloads

The work is largely organized in such a way that employees have enough work but not too much. Certain divisions (e.g. logistics and the restaurant) have to contend with heavy work pressures but

this is carefully monitored and has already been reduced as shown by the reduction in overtime expenses in recent years. Personnel turnover is generally low; this is closely related to the working climate and the roles played by Human Resources and management.

The department offers a special arrangement for teleworking and working from home, possibilities for working part-time, and both special and social leave. Attempts are also made to be flexible in regard to providing customized solutions.

Integration of WHP into management policy

WHP is an integrated part of management's tasks although it is clear that some persons are more interested in this aspect than others. When supervisors also bear this responsibility, good employee management results. Progress discussions often devote attention to working conditions policy, absenteeism and aggression, but this is not yet done on a regular basis.

Related topics and their objectives

In addition to such themes as exercise, work pressure, workstation organization and aggression, there are 32 competencies being worked on throughout the municipal organization. These include dedication, planning and organizing, identifying potential managers, initiative, decision-making skills, self-control, problem analysis, networking skills, empathy, personal presentation, client orientation, listening skills, persuasive-

ness, adaptability, motivation, self-insight, delegating skills, awareness of one's surroundings, and resistance to pressure. For each of these competencies, a postcard with a description and illustration has been created for free distribution to employees.

Workstation organization is being given constant attention, and supervisors are attempting to remind employees of its importance on a regular basis. Clear goals have been formulated, particularly in regard to absenteeism and aggression policy. The use of such facilities as company fitness facilities is being monitored systematically but qualitative testing and measurable objectives are still lacking.

Establishment of information structures

WHP activities are being announced in the staff magazine, "Faciliteiten", and communicated in the employees' council's newsletter. A lot of information is being distributed over the intranet and by means of the spoken word. News on the intranet is also printed out for the 40% of the workforce that has no PC. Because some employees have difficulty with reading written information, these topics (e.g. aggression, addressed in a folder) are also covered during progress discussions.

Analysis of instruments and results

Used for ongoing analysis of health-related information are the verification

of the industrial medical officer and the strategy being applied to absenteeism. There is also sufficient flexibility for finding solutions to problems as they develop.

In regard to RSI, information has been gathered systematically and an inventory of points for improvement has been generated allowing for the creation of an implementation plan.

In 2001, the Facility Department carried out a study on work pressure. The conclusion was that although this existed at certain divisions within the FAD, either the necessary attention was being devoted to this issue within those divisions or this pressure was not being experienced as a problem. As a result of this study, work pressure has become an established point on the agenda for progress discussions.

Of all the cases of absenteeism, only 10% (relatively few) are the result of psychological problems, more than 20% are due to musculoskeletal problems, and almost 25% are the result of respiratory complaints (e.g. flu). The number of illness reports resulting from work activities is low; the number of illness reports related to labour relations is relatively small. Nevertheless, there is a clear increase in absenteeism among employees older than 45. Based on figures from the Arbo Unie in regard to the FAD employees' age structure and their absenteeism, it appears that 62% of the employees is older than 45 and that this group is responsible for about 66% of the absenteeism.

Based on an analysis of absenteeism figures, it was decided to have immediate supervisors participate in the social medical team; to organize more systematic communications about absenteeism; to conduct further research into the causes of the high absenteeism in certain parts of the organization; to develop a special policy for older employees with special attention being paid to career development, physical stress, work pressure and fitness; and to devote extra attention to reintegration.

In 1999, tests conducted within the framework of the Back Problems Prevention Programme showed that the back condition of the average FAD employee was poor, even for people without back problems. As a result, certain employees participated in an appropriate training activity.

Implementation

As mentioned previously, a special strategy was developed to deal with absenteeism.

Reintegration is also receiving a great deal of attention in the form of individual programmes that attempt to find suitable work as quickly as possible.

For older employees, arrangements are often made in regard to assisting them to keep working until the age of early retirement. Attempts are being made to retain everyone within the organization.

As part of the Lease Fit Plan, the FAD has been purchasing hours at Samenwerkingsverband Bedrijfsfitness, a net-

work of fitness facilities specializing in employee fitness, since 2001. These hours are released for FAD employees so that they can engage in physical fitness activities under supervision twice a week. Lease Fit was originally set up for older employees but has since been expanded to include a larger group.

By participating in the Interbeweegplan, a special exercise programme, employees engage in a customized exercise programme in the Bedrijfsfitness conditioning facility under the supervision of a physiotherapist. This programme is especially for employees who are in dire need of such a programme. It is engaged in upon the almost compulsory recommendation of the industrial medical officer.

The FAD engaged in a special Back Problems Prevention Programme in which a group of 44 employees participated in a study into the effect of training exercises to improve the condition of their backs.

Toward the end of 2001, members of upper-level management participated in a stress management training activity. Since then, middle-level management has also participated in a similar course.

A procedure to deal with aggressive clients has been established in the form of an aggression plan. In addition, every newly appointed employee is trained in handling aggression and informed about the possible consequences of aggression on the behaviour of the involved employee.

Supervisors are trained in coaching their employees in dealing with aggression. All employees who could be exposed to aggression receive an annual refresher course. Time and facilities are also available should follow-up care be necessary.

There are sufficient possibilities for development and a number of employees have also received another job as a result of career discussions. Increasing attention is being devoted to the individual in the form of Personal Development Plans and annual performance reviews. When employees request training or education, their requests are almost always granted.

Evaluation and results

■ Employee satisfaction

Employees are generally satisfied with the WHP activities. In 2000, the director was nominated for best facility manager in the Netherlands. Participants in the Lease Fit programme are very satisfied with this facility.

■ Client satisfaction

Client satisfaction studies and benchmarking in regard to the catering and events show that clients are also satisfied with the Facility Department.

■ Improvement in health and well-being

The special attention devoted to work pressures has led to the prevention of such problems as the development of backlogs, the provision of lower quality

services, absenteeism and a lot of overtime. Although work pressure sometimes exists, it is not leading to stress symptoms.

Unlike almost all other municipal departments, absenteeism dropped in 2001 from 9.95% (2000) to 9.27%. Efforts are also being devoted to continue this downward trend. Frequency has also dropped to below the average for the Municipality of The Hague.

Among employees having participated in the 10-week training to improve their back condition, their back condition has definitely improved.

Benefits

In general, the FAD has become more business-oriented as well as devoting more attention to the needs of employees. Its policies in these regards have been more focused, and higher objectives are being reached.

All employees enjoy a great deal of freedom in structuring their work; there are many possibilities. Much has changed in recent years: care devoted to the needs of employees has received much more attention. There is now much more of a focus on the individual, the organization is more oriented to results, and there is much attention devoted to social matters. Within the FAD, all employees are receiving opportunities for further development.

Looking to the future

Work pressure and absenteeism are being closely monitored as a matter of course. The foundations for a WHP policy are clearly evident, and many activities in this regard are being organized. There are plans for arriving at a better integration of activities and to keep a better eye on trends and needs by means of qualitative research. In most cases, management is definitely committed to the WHP policy, but this could still be improved upon.

The Dutch Centre for WHP would be very pleased to present the Facility Department of the Municipality of The Hague as a "Model of Good Practice" in the public sector within the framework of the third European Conference on Workplace Health Promotion to be held in Barcelona in June.