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Kvorning, Laura Veng; Hasle, Peter

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The impact of occupational health and safety policy interventions tailored to small enterprises in Denmark

Laura Veng KVORNING¹, Peter HASLE²

¹*National Research Centre for the Working Environment, Denmark, lkv@nrcwe.dk, ²Centre for Industrial Production, Department of Business and Management, Aalborg University, hasle@business.aau.dk*

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1. Introduction

Research has provided important knowledge about the special needs of small enterprises (Hasle & Limborg, 2006), but the understanding of successful national policy intervention programmes targeted small enterprises is still limited. This paper evaluates such a programme in Denmark. The Government launched a programme in 2010 called the Prevention Packages targeting musculoskeletal disorders in small construction and auto repair enterprises. The programme provides financial support and support by a facilitator to guide the enterprises through a predefined process outlined in a step-by-step manual. The different phases of the process are explained in detail including the aim and expected outcome of the process (See more details in Hasle, Kvorning, Rasmussen, Smith, & Flyvholm, 2012).

This paper evaluates the implementation and impact of the Prevention Packages. It is assessed through a self-evaluation by the enterprises and as a change of behaviour aimed at improving OHS with the focus on prevention of exposure to physically demanding work tasks. The impact is linked to the way the enterprises implemented the packages.

2. Methods

The study uses a mixed-method design, encompassing quantitative and qualitative data collected from the participating enterprises. Qualitative case studies were carried out in 12 enterprises. The workplaces were visited three times during and after implementation of the Prevention Package and the owner-manager and the employees were interviewed about their implementation and the outcome of the package. In addition conditions at the workplace were observed with a focus on development and changes of OHS indicated in the interviews. In the 12 case enterprises we conducted 34 interviews with owner-managers (in 2 enterprises the third visit was not possible), 20 with employees (either focus groups or single interviews except for four enterprises) and 34 observations (visits and meetings with the facilitators). The quantitative data material is based on survey data from all the participants (owner-managers and employees) before and after implementation of the programme. In auto repair 221 enterprises received the questionnaire (response rate employers 76% before and 55% after implementation) and in construction 192 enterprises received the questionnaire (response rate employers 77% before and 53% after implementation). The combination of

the data sources made it possible 1) to assess the background of the participating enterprises e.g. the history, the management, organisational structure, the attitude towards OHS, and how the enterprise was introduced and motivated to participate in the Prevention Packages, 2) to measure the participants' engagement in the process, the development of the process and the results of the implementation process, 3) to measure the impact of the process and to what extent the process has led to behaviour change and sustained OHS improvements at the workplace e.g. improvements of the physical/ergonomic and psycho-social working conditions, reduced absence or strengthened retention and whether it has been an economic benefit for the enterprise. Change of behaviour is understood as the new work routines and practices which can be both organisational and physical changes.

3. Results

The results show that the programme worked differently in the two industries. In construction, the employers had been introduced mainly through labour inspectors, whereas employers in auto repair had been introduced either through employer associations or networks. From the case studies we learned that the way the programme was introduced influenced the motivation of the employers to engage in the programme. A pressure to participate from labour inspectors could push them to participate but the motivation for practical implementation would be low. The motivation to engage in the programme also depended on the content of the prevention package, the economic support, and the possibility for facilitation.

Overall the survey reveals that most of the participating enterprises implemented the activities outlined in the step-by-step manual. The prevention packages included a strong element of employee participation, two thirds of the employees were actively involved in the implementation process. Half of the employees expressed that they felt they had been able to make suggestions on how to implement the Prevention Package at the workplace.

According to the case studies, some enterprises carefully followed the manual whereas others modified the activities in order to make a better fit with the context at the workplace e.g. changes the sequence of activities, more or less meetings than recommended and/or addition of new activities. Half of the case enterprises had difficulties in implementing changes according to the step-by-step manual. Some of these owner-managers expressed a rather low motivation for implementation, maybe because they felt pushed by labour inspectors to apply for a package.

In terms of the outcome of the programme, the survey finds that most of the employers experienced the enterprise to have benefitted from the programme but with a more positive experience in auto repair with 82% who experienced improvement of the physical working environment and 61% assessed the Prevention Package a positive investment. In construction 73% experienced an improved physical working environment and 40% a positive investment. For the employees the majority also experienced improvements of the physical working environment again with a more positive experience in auto repair. One explanation could be the temporary and ever changing workplaces in construction which may hamper the implementation of a systematic improvement programme. Half of the 12 case enterprises showed proof of behavioural change at the visit paid at the completion of the package and four of these enterprises have sustained the changes after six months. Examples of behavioural changes include new work routines and practices in the organisation of the work e.g. systems and structures to avoid heavy lifting and awkward working positions and physical changes e.g. technical aids, new/changed interior, and in addition four other enterprises have initiated improvements of other working environment hazards e.g. workplace risk assessment and new lightening. Successful participation of the

employees as well as owner-managers' ability to incorporate the methods used in the Prevention Package in the daily business and to see the long-term benefit e.g. effectiveness, profit, employee well-being were all important mechanisms for a positive impact of the process in the enterprises sustaining changes after six month.

The conclusion is that it is worth tailoring national policy intervention programmes to small enterprises. Such programmes can be implemented with a reasonable impact when they are introduced by trusted intermediaries and the topic and content are relevant and economically beneficial for the employer. Such programmes can lead to behavioural changes if the implementation is sufficient tailored to the specific context for small enterprises in the specific sector. The programme is dependent on an engagement from both employers and employees and their ability to see the long-term benefit and incorporate the programme in the daily business. If these elements are not present, it can be expected to cause a number of enterprises to drop-out.

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